

A Brief Note on Herbal Medicine

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Commentary

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DESCRIPTION

Herbal medicine (also herbalism) is the study of pharmacognosy and the application of medicinal plants, which form the foundation of traditional medicine. Herbs can be administered in a variety of ways, the most common of which is a liquid consumed as an herbal tea or a (possibly diluted) plant extract.

Herbal teas, also known as tisanes are the liquid that results from extracting herbs into water and they can be made in a variety of ways. Infusions are hot water extracts of herbs like chamomile or mint that have been steeped. Decoctions are long-term boiled extracts of harder substances such as roots or bark. The cold infusion of plants with high mucilage content, such as sage or thyme, is known as maceration. Plants are chopped and placed in cold water to make macerates. After that, they are left to stand for 7 to 12 hours (depending on herb used). Mostly, 10 hours is required for most macerates.

Tinctures are alcoholic extracts of herbs that are typically more potent than herbal teas. Tinctures are typically made by combining the herb with 100 percent pure ethanol (or a mixture of 100% ethanol and water). The ethanol percentage in a finished tincture is at least 25%. Glycerin can be used to make non-alcoholic tinctures but it is thought to be less absorbable by the body than alcohol-based tinctures and has a shorter shelf life. Herbal wine and elixirs are alcoholic extracts of herbs, typically containing 12-38% ethanol. Liquid extracts, dry extracts, and nebulisates are examples of extracts. Liquid extracts are liquids that contain less ethanol than tinctures. Tinctures are typically vacuum distilled to create them. Dry extracts are plant extracts.

Many essential oils can burn the skin or have too high a concentration when used directly; diluting them in olive oil or another food grade oil, such as almond oil, allows them to be used safely as a topical. Other types of topical delivery mechanisms include salves, oils, balms, creams and lotions. Herbal oil extracts are used in the majority of topical applications. Soaking herbs in food grade oil for weeks or months allows certain phytochemicals to be extracted into the oil. This oil can then be turned into salves, creams, lotions or simply used as topical oil. This method is used to create many massage oils, antibacterial salves and wound healing compounds.

Herb consumption may have negative consequences. Furthermore, "adulteration, inappropriate formulation or a lack of understanding of plant and drug interactions has resulted in adverse reactions that are sometimes fatal or life-threatening." Before medical use, proper double-blind clinical trials are required to determine the safety and efficacy of each plant.

Although many people believe that herbal medicines are safe because they are natural, herbal medicines and synthetic drugs can interact and cause toxicity in the consumer. Herbal remedies can also be dangerously contaminated and herbal medicines with unknown efficacy may be mistakenly used to replace prescription medications.

Standardization of purity and dosage is not required in the United States, but even products manufactured to the same specifications may differ due to biochemical variations within a plant species. Plants have chemical defense mechanisms against predators, which can be harmful or lethal to humans. Poison hemlock and nightshade are two examples of highly toxic herbs. They are not marketed as herbs to the general public because the risks are well known, owing in part to a long and colourful history in Europe associated with "sorcery," "magic," and intrigue. Although it is not common, adverse reactions to herbs in common use have been reported. Herb consumption has been linked to serious negative outcomes on occasion. Chronic kidney disease has been linked to a case of severe potassium deficiency.