

History of Herbal Medicine

There is a rise in the use of herbal medicines in our country. People are looking to improve their health and often see herbs as a way to do that. Many companies market herbs as "all-natural," safe alternatives to drugs, and part of a healthy lifestyle. These statements are misleading and run contrary to the traditional use of herbs. The result is patient confusion, distrust of herbs in the medical community and in some cases death due to inappropriate use of herbs.

Many herbs are very safe, however some traditional herbal remedies were known to be toxic or damaging, and were used only when necessary. Various herbal substances were used to change the way a person felt, and were used until they were no longer needed. This ability to change how a person feels is critical to how and why we use herbs as medicine. It is also why, generally speaking, herbs are not meant to be used long term, like vitamins, as part of a healthy lifestyle.

If you have a chronic medical condition, you may need to use herbs for many years to help control the condition. But some herbs were meant to be used only for a few days. Proper herb use is not about taking herbs, but knowing what you need and when you need it.

Traditional herbal systems developed from food and cooking traditions. It was recognized that some foods were considered extreme and had effects on how the eater felt. By categorizing the effects or the symptoms caused by food and comparing that to symptoms expressed by a sick person, a food-based treatment could be formulated. In the same way that spices are used in cooking, medicinal foods and herbs were mixed to balance flavors and effect. The result, through trial and error, was a

refinement of how to mix herbs for the greatest benefit. With this in mind it is therefore important to look at the diet of the patient, since the diet may have a dynamic contrary to the dynamics of the herbs the patient needs.

The important component was not necessarily the herbs themselves, but the diagnostic criteria that indicate herb usage given the patient's symptoms. These symptoms were not the same indicators used or interpreted by modern biomedical medicine. In some cultures these diagnostic criteria became quite extensive, allowing for the understanding and treatment of just about any medical condition that may have been encountered by that culture.

Many herbs on store shelves have been stripped of the diagnostic criteria that indicate what symptoms were relieved by that given herb. What is left is general information that can mislead the consumer. For example, most herbal traditions identify several imbalances in the body that could cause a headache, and have many herbal formulations specific to each type. Knowing that a herb is used for treating a headache is not enough information to know whether that herb is appropriate for your headache. The herb you choose may even make the condition worse, or interfere with other medical treatments you are using.

The best advice is to make informed medical decisions. Tell your physician and pharmacist about your herb use. Consult a Herbalist, or other professional with specific training in herbal diagnostics to make sure you are using herbs properly. Do not substitute herbs for drugs without professional advice. Herbs are traditional medicine, and should be treated as you would treat any medicine.



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