

Natural healing – part 1 ©

This report looks at natural medicines and how to make them. It's not meant as the final word, but more a starting point. Safety first though – herbal medicines will kill you if taken without reading the labels. Some of the essential oils and tinctures are for external use only, as are the salves. I can't imagine anyone trying to eat one of my salves – it would taste like a candle! But, a child might stick a finger in and lick it, which is not a good idea - care needed. I'll give a few links at the end for anyone who does want to take the topic further or do a course. But, let's start by taking a swift look at all the different terms.

Infusions, decoctions and syrups

I make an anti-cough **syrup** that contains a mix of fresh berries and citrus fruit, sweetened with honey. The detailed recipe can be found elsewhere in this website section, but I tend to use either fresh raspberries or blackberries – do feel free to experiment, though. With standard linctus costing about £8 in the chemist, this mix is a bit cheaper and has more vitamin C. If you add water to the syrup, it makes an effective cordial too.

Many people think that **infusions** are the same as teas. This is not quite true, although boiling water is required and the flowers or green parts of the herb. A basic infusion involves a dried herb or herbs – about 1-2 teaspoons – with about six fluid ounces of boiling water. Put the herbs in a cup, pour over the boiling water and leave to infuse for 10 minutes. Then strain the infusion before drinking it.

A **decoction** involves the bark or woody parts of a plant – eg 15g of the plants and 750ml of cold water – use a saucepan and pour the cold water over the plant/ herbs. Cover the mix and bring to the boil, then simmer for about 20 minutes and strain the decoction. It is best to split the mixture into 3-4 amounts.

So, what are some good examples of such mixtures? It is always necessary to check specific dosages before using some herbs, but here are a few known suggestions for **fighting common complaints**:

- Echinacea and thyme syrup
- Chrysanthemum and elderflower infusion
- Mullein and marshmallow infusion
- Elderberry or elderflower syrup
- Sweet violet and ginger syrup
- Mullein and aniseed syrup
- Nettle and cleavers infusion
- White willow decoction
- Dandelion decoction.

Tinctures

A **tincture** is really a concentrated form of herbal medicine, which is prepared using alcohol with the herbs. Many people use vodka as the cleanest type of alcohol for tinctures. The alcohol preserves the herbs for a year or so. A tincture is much stronger than a decoction or an infusion – smaller amounts are needed for doses, but many tinctures are used in the ratio of 1:5 strength; check the bottle for any differences.

Basically, what you do to make a tincture, is to select about 200g of dried herbs and add them to about one litre of alcohol in a sealed jar. Ensure that the herbs are covered completely by the alcohol and leave the jar for about two weeks in a cupboard, away from any sunshine. Then you strain the mixture (eg muslin) and filter it again through a new coffee filter. I'd suggest pouring the mixture into a sterile, dark glass bottle, labelling it and storing away. So, what types of herbs do well in tinctures? Here's a few suggestions.

- Angelica root – for catarrh, bronchitis or chronic indigestion
- Borage – for stress
- Hawthorn – for high blood pressure
- Turmeric – for high cholesterol or period pains
- Hops – for nervous anxiety, tension and to ease colic
- St John's wort – for exhaustion or depression
- Lavender – for headaches, nervous tension or asthma
- Coltsfoot – for bronchitis or whooping cough
- Feverfew- for migraine
- Thistle – for liver or gall bladder problems.

Oil-based salves and creams

My favourite type of herbal application really, as it's quite easy to make and lasts quite a while. Just like the infusions, it's important to use metal sieves and glass jugs – plastic containers and hot oil are not a good combination.

Creams are really easy to do and there are many methods. They're lighter than salves and sink into the skin quicker. I'd suggest using 1-2 tablespoons of skin or aqueous cream in a bowl, placing it over another bowl of boiling water and reducing it to liquid. Then add the same measure of your herb of choice, eg chickweed or peppermint leaves, and stir until the mixture is the same colour. After an hour or so, take the mixture away from the heat, strain it with a metal strainer, add some fine oatmeal to thicken and whisk - and leave it in a glass bowl to cool. When it's cool, you can put the cream in small bottles or flat tins for storage.

With **ointments or salves**, some people use essential oils to obtain the natural healing, but I would normally go for the actual herb. Oil-based salves stay on the skin for a little longer and have a more prolonged effect. What you have to do is use about 40-50g of dried herbs and infuse them in a pan of rapeseed or sunflower oil (not vegetable oil). I guess the best ratio is 1 part herbs to 2 parts oil, but that is only a rough rule of thumb.

Let the mixture infuse for about four hours on a low heat and strain through a metal sieve into a glass jug. Return the mixture to the pan and add 100g of organic beeswax. As the mix starts to stiffen, transfer to small jars, letting the mixture set and cool. Some people may favour adding benzoin as a preservative too, but I find the beeswax is normally fine – less chemicals the better is my rule. OK, then what could you put in a salve? Here's some of mine.

- Comfrey – sprains, joint stiffness, fractures or tendonitis
- Marigold – eczema, dry or chapped skin or rashes
- Chamomile – fungal infections, scabs, insect bites or cuts
- Celandine – haemorrhoids
- Nick's winter warmer = black mustard seeds, cinnamon, grated ginger, cloves,, chilli pepper, rosemary – circulation
- Slippery elm – splinters, thorns or wounds with pus
- Chickweed – minor burns, itchy skin or rashes.
- Witch hazel bark – varicose veins, bruises or cuts
- Red clover and rib-leaf plantain – wounds
- Lemon balm – cold sores, cuts or insect bites.

Thinking about a few other herbal remedies, there's no space here to go into details about bath herbs, soaps, massage oils, gargles, face scrubs, toners, powders, compresses or scalp treatments – topics perhaps for another time. But, here's a few **lesser-known** remedies for common problems.

1. A banana skin can also be used to draw out splinters.
2. Poultices are useful too and flour is good for excess fluid retention. Take some buckwheat flour and mix it to a paste with water. Wrap it in a bandage around your leg or foot and the flour will pull the excess fluid from your limb.
3. Achy backs are not new and ginger is great as a poultice. Put some grated ginger root in a mix of hot water and oil. Stir well and dip a towel in the mixture. Apply to the bare skin where it aches and add a dry towel on top.
4. Now I think about it, ginger is really good as a detox and puller of poisons or cysts. Take some grated ginger root, press for juice, add rapeseed or sunflower oil and put it into a bottle – shake and apply to skin if you have dry skin or stiff joints.

Essential and infused oils

An **infused or macerated oil** is one where herbs are covered with sunflower or rapeseed oil in a glass bowl and the mixture placed over another saucepan of boiling water on the cooker. Heat gently for two hours and add new water. Strain the mixture, add fresh herbs and warm again gently for an hour. Strain the mixture again and pour into sterile glass bottles. The oil lasts for 3-4 months in a dark, cool place. An example is ginger for tight muscles, achy joints or cartilage stiffness.

And so, we come to **essential oils**. This is a major topic in its own right and, suffice to say, if you wish to practise making such oils at home, you'll need proper dilution, distillation equipment and respect for the process. Every essential oil is the active medicinal parts of a plant in a concentrated form and most require a carrier oil, ie almond, jojoba, coconut or a vegetable base oil for application, eg:

- Massage oils need 2% essential oil to 98% base oil
- Bath oils need 5% essential oil to 15ml of vegetable oil
- Very few essential oils can be taken internally
- Most essential oils are not good for young children
- Some essential oils should be avoided in pregnancy.

So, which essential oils are **good** for you? Here's some suggestions.

- Lavender – tranquillity, restful sleep and muscle relaxant
- Peppermint – helps with indigestion and cools fevers
- Lemon – helps sore throats, eases gout and kidney stone pain
- Frankincense – good for skin conditions or headaches
- Oregano - fights infections, good for colds and flu
- Eucalyptus – fights asthma, coughs and sinusitis
- Clary sage – good for anxiety, stress and PMS.

Conversely, which essential oils are **less good** for you? Mostly, it comes down to the dilution – after all, 1-2 drops of peppermint oil are roughly the same as 30 cups of peppermint tea. Let's start with those that are bad news for those in pregnancy.

- Wintergreen
- Pennyroyal
- Hyssop
- Mugwort
- Tansy
- Wormwood
- Tarragon
- Camphor.

Other essential oils have less well-known **detrimental** effects.

1. Some of the citrus oils, eg lemon, lime or grapefruit, can amplify the sun's rays on your skin or UV light, causing excessive sunburn, blisters, swelling or melanoma risk.
2. Some oils may react badly with prescription drugs, eg for liver or kidney problems and for those with auto-immune issues.
3. Young children can be vulnerable to essential oils, due to their thinner skins – such oils need a lot more dilution – the safest ones are chamomile, orange, lavender and lemon, but best to have a medical skin test first.
4. Most essential oils aren't good for pets. Two of the worst oils for pets are tea tree and pennyroyal, even though several commercial products use the oils against fleas or skin problems. Cats are particularly vulnerable to these poisons.
5. Certain essential oils can cause skin irritation, eg rashes or itchy skin.

Note: I wondered about a section about flower essences, but this is a separate category and is classed as a food – so, it merits another file in the **Waverley Healing Wheel** in the future.

Conclusion – further information

If, after reading all this, you still want to investigate the subject further, there are several sources of information. The main places in the UK are listed below.

National Institute of Medical Herbalists – www.nimh.org.uk

British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy – www.bant.org.uk

Garden Organic – www.gardenorganic.org.uk

British Herbal Medicine Association – www.bhma.info

