



# CHINESE HERBALISM

## WHAT IS HERBALISM?

Healers in many different health traditions use herbs. This fact sheet discusses herbs as a part of traditional Chinese medicine.

Traditional Chinese medicine is at least 2,500 years old. It views the human body as a system of energy flows. When these flows are balanced, the body is healthy. Practitioners take their patients' pulses and examine their tongues to diagnose energy imbalances. In Chinese medicine, pulses can be taken at three positions on each wrist, and at three depths at each position.

Illness is not defined by symptoms or the name of a disease like "HIV infection." Instead, a practitioner of Chinese medicine will talk about energy imbalances. The language can sound very strange, like "yin deficiency" or "liver heat rising." The Chinese words yin and yang refer to opposing energies that should be in balance, and Qi (pronounced "chee") can be roughly translated as energy or life force.

In traditional Chinese medicine, there are many ways to improve the balance of the body's energy flows. The most common techniques used in the western world are exercise techniques such as Qigong or Tai Chi, acupuncture, and herbalism. Fact Sheet 703 has more information on Chinese acupuncture.

Many practitioners of Chinese medicine specialize in either acupuncture or herbalism. Very few use both methods.

## WHY DO PEOPLE WITH HIV USE CHINESE HERBALISM?

Chinese herbs do not cure HIV infection. Many people, however, believe that the herbs have helped them improve their overall energy, or deal with the side effects of antiretroviral medications (ARVs). Some people have used herbs to reduce the upset stomach or diarrhea caused by their medications.

In general, an herbalist makes up a personalized mixture for each patient, based on that person's particular energy flows and imbalances. However, some

practitioners of Chinese medicine have noticed a consistent "toxic heat" pattern of energy imbalances in people with advanced HIV disease. Due to Chinese medicine's emphasis on long life and immune enhancement, they feel that some herbal preparations will probably help anybody with HIV.

## HOW ARE CHINESE HERBS USED?

Based on your energy imbalances, your herbalist will prescribe a combination of herbs for you to use. The Chinese meaning of herbs can include various parts of plants as well as minerals and animal parts. The herbs can come in several forms:

- **"Loose" or "raw" herbs:** you get a bag of various dried pieces of roots, bark, leaves, seeds, powders, and other items. These are usually boiled and you drink the "tea." This is considered the most potent form for herbs, but it can be difficult to prepare them.
- **Powdered herbs:** Dried herbs are ground into a powder. The powder might be mixed into water to drink, or taken in a capsule.
- **Tinctures:** Dried herbs are prepared in a mixture of water and alcohol. You drink a dose of the tincture.
- **Patent medicines:** Some of the most common combinations of herbs are available in prepared form as pills, capsules, creams, or other forms. There is usually very little or no labeling on these medicines except in Chinese.

Chinese herbs are prescribed to correct energy imbalances. You might feel better, or symptoms might disappear, but the best way to know if it's time to stop or change the herbs you are taking is to consult with your herbalist.

## WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Most herbs used in Chinese medicine are safe at a wide range of dosages. However, some may not be safe or manufactured carefully. For example, in 2003 the FDA banned products including the herb Ma Huang (ephedra). Some herbs may be toxic at very high doses, or

might not be safe to use during pregnancy. The safest way to use Chinese herbs is according to the instructions of a trained herbalist. **Be sure to tell your herbalist and your health care provider if you think the herbs are causing diarrhea, headaches, or any other problems.**

## HOW DO HERBS INTERACT WITH OTHER THERAPIES?

Almost no controlled research has been done on specific interactions between Chinese herbs and other therapies, including ARVs. There is no information on any dangerous interactions.

It is always a good idea to let every practitioner on your health care team know about all of the therapies you are using. In some cases, a western medicine and Chinese herbs might have a similar effect and combining them would be too much. For example, it might not be a good idea to use Chinese herbs that help calm you down and sleeping pills at the same time.

## HOW DO WE KNOW IT WORKS?

There are several scientific journals that present research on the health benefits of Chinese herbs. However, almost all of them are published in China.

Studies on treating HIV with Chinese herbs have had mixed results. However, these studies usually studied Chinese herbs as ARVs. More recently, herbs are being combined with ARVs. Some herbalists believe that the best use of herbs will be to help deal with the side effects of strong ARVs, and to generally strengthen the immune system.

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