

Herbal Medicine for Stress Management

Stress is part of many people's daily lives and challenges our physical, mental and emotional resources. Short-term stress can be useful in achieving goals and overcoming challenges, but prolonged or repeated stresses can be harmful and may compromise your health. The hormones your body releases to deal with stress, including adrenalin and cortisol, affect the way your body and brain work, leading to changes in your physical and emotional responses.

Stress keeps your muscles in a state of tension leading to neck and shoulder pain and headaches. It affects your brain chemistry making you irritable, depressed or unable to concentrate. It also challenges your immune system, leaving you prone to colds, flu, and allergies. Prolonged stress is also implicated in serious health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, mental illness, stroke, and adrenal gland exhaustion.

But don't be alarmed! There are many ways to minimise the negative effects of stress, using a combination of diet, herbal medicine, relaxation, exercise and positive thought.

Diet

A balanced, nutritious diet based on wholegrains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and adequate good-quality protein helps to provide the basic nutrients your body needs to prevent depletion of your physical reserves. Many people find that by avoiding stimulants such as tea, coffee and sugary foods, they cope better with stress and experience less irritability and insomnia. Small regular healthy snacks help to maintain your energy throughout the day and stave off hunger pangs and cravings.

Medical herbalists offer nutritional counselling to ensure your diet contains everything you need in a healthy balanced diet.

Exercise

Regular gentle exercise is a great way to control stress levels and keep blood pressure and cholesterol down. A brisk 30 minute walk every day will produce benefits and improve your sense of wellbeing as will other easy and enjoyable forms of exercise such as swimming, yoga, tai chi and stretching and cycling.

Relaxation

Setting aside some quiet time exclusively for yourself can often be a challenge. Take time out from a busy schedule or family life to give yourself a chance to recharge your emotional batteries. It doesn't matter what you do – go to a movie, read a book, relax in the bath, or go for a massage – what's important is that you take time for yourself.

Supplements

Optimum nutrition is essential if you are busy and stressed. Ideally you should gain your nutrition from nourishing foods, but this is not always possible,

either due to the quality of food available, missing meals or the extra demands on your body. Your body's requirements for B vitamins is increased during times of stress. B vitamins are vital for the production of energy from food, adrenal hormones and for the proper functioning of your nervous system so it may be advisable to take a B complex supplement – your herbalist or nutritionist can advise you.

Herbal medicine

Many conditions seen regularly in our herbal medicine clinics result from chronic stress – psoriasis, anxiety, irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, insomnia, eczema and even arthritis can be made worse by stress. Herbal medicine can help by giving gentle support to counter the damaging effects of stress on your body and to help you cope better in stressful situations. There are many over-the-counter remedies available, or you might prefer to consult with a qualified medical herbalist for a personalised treatment plan.

Herbs traditionally used at times of stress include:

Valerian – used by herbalists as a relaxing nerve tonic to reduce anxiety and tension. Particularly useful in treating insomnia, it promotes a natural restful sleep

Scullcap – helps to relieve tension and support the nerves. Combines well with limeflowers for exhaustion caused by stress and an excellent remedy for tension headaches.

Hops – a powerful relaxant to reduce tension and promote good sleep. Avoid in depression.

Oats – a gentle, yet effective tonic for the nervous system, especially where there is fatigue due to overwork or illness. Combines well with skullcap and passionflower as a general nerve tonic.

Passionflower – a gentle relaxant that is traditionally used to promote restful sleep.

Limeflowers – have a reputation for lowering blood pressure, especially where it is due to stress and tension. Combines well with hawthorn and yarrow.

Aromatherapy

Essential oils can be used singly or in combination to promote relaxation and reduce tension and anxiety. Use in an oil vapouriser in your bedroom or office, or diluted in carrier oil in the bath or for massage.

Lavender is well known for its calming properties and is safe for all the family to use. A few drops on the pillow at night can aid a restful sleep.

Geranium is a deeply relaxing oil that combines well with lavender, ylang ylang and vetivert. Other beneficial oils for stress relief include sweet marjoram, neroli, rose, sandalwood, frankincense and chamomile.

Herbal medicine can be used to relieve a wide range of health problems and in qualified hands is a safe and effective approach to health care. We recommend

that you seek the advice of a qualified medical herbalist before using herbal medicines to ensure a safe and effective treatment.

As with all health problems, we strongly recommend that you consult a qualified medical herbalist to create a specific prescription and treatment plan to meet your individual needs.

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