

## **Laying on of Leaves: Topical Herbalism for Pain, Injury, Fatigue and Stress**

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Applying bruised or crushed leaves, flowers and roots directly to the body in the form of a poultice is one of the oldest and simplest forms of medicine. More refined compresses, soaks, liniments and oils can also do wonders. Topical herbalism works well alone or in combination with internal remedies in all kinds of acute injuries, as well as chronic conditions involving pain or spasm, including soft tissue and bone injuries, bruises, nerve pain, back pain, joint pain, and muscular cramps (skeletal, respiratory, digestive and uterine). Infections and fevers, even fatigue and eye strain, respond well. Topical preparations are quite safe—there are rarely contraindications. Kids love them, and they're a great way to form direct, intimate relationship with medicinal plants. In this class, you'll get instructions and recipes and experience preparations first-hand, with emphasis on relaxing, rejuvenating and inspiring.

### **WHY DO TOPICAL PREPS?**

- to enhance efficacy of internal remedies (double up activity)
- to avoid digestive metabolism—get more immediate effects, but also get chemistry to skin or other peripheral tissue that otherwise wouldn't make it out of the gut (e.g. berberine, mucilage)
- to take advantage of the benefits of the “carriers” (e.g. oils, water, massage, immobility/rest)
- to create relationship with the plants, experiencing more texture, smell, direct/conscious contact than with many internal remedies
- aesthetics—plants are lovely and often offer medicines of beauty and delight when used topically

In my opinion, medicine should engender pleasure for practitioner and client alike. In fact, ideally medicine would not feel like “medicine”, but would insinuate itself into the daily routine, a sanctuary for the body and spirit that each of us turn to for respite and rejuvenation. To this end, preparations should be beautiful to look at, exciting to smell, and inviting to touch. As well, creating intention, however simple, around our practices can invite our presence into the moment and remind us of our commitment to self-care.

With this in mind, experiment. Make sure your personal aesthetics are pleased, as well as your client's. If it makes you happy to create the preparation, that delight will be transmitted as part of the medicine to your client. If your client feels happy or relaxed or empowered when they prepare and use the plants, at least half of the work is done. The herbs can then initiate their actions in the body with the support of the human spirit and psyche. This is no small thing.

Check out the research on intention, therapeutic encounter and placebo for more on these concepts:

<http://programinplacebostudies.org/research/research-in-neuroscience/>

<http://deanradin.com/evidence/Shiah2013.pdf>

### **TOPICAL PREPARATION/APPLICATION METHODS**

poultice, compress (aka fomentation), soak/bath, liniment, oil/salve/cream, steam, brushing/sweeping

## WHEN TO USE TOPICAL REMEDIES

### A. Acute injuries: sprain/strain, bruises, bone breaks, complex tissue traumas

#### Sample Recipe #1: Comfrey Root Poultice

The poultice is simply plant material, whole or mashed, which is layered or spread on the skin and covered with cloth to hold it in place. This one can be valuable in cases of traumatic damage to bones, tendons, ligaments, muscles and even nerves, encouraging rapid cell proliferation and reducing inflammation, as well as scar tissue development. The ginger root acts to warm the poultice to increase circulation to the area and enhance absorption. Ideally, apply the poultice before bed and leave on all night. Daytime is fine, too, but sometimes harder to tolerate depending on the location. (Not for use on complex injuries with deep or dirty, open wounds.)

a quantity of fresh\* comfrey root sufficient to cover affected area  
a small amount of fresh ginger root (usually 1 inch will suffice)  
enough gauze to cover the area  
an addition cloth to hold on gauze (could also be ace bandage)  
plastic wrap

Grate the fresh roots together, allowing them to form a mucilaginous mash. Spread this mash over the affected area and cover with gauze (depending on the body part, it may be easier to put the mash on the gauze and then apply them together). Wrap the gauze in place securely with cloth or ace bandage, then wrap the whole affair with plastic wrap. This prevents the inevitable ooze from trickling into unwanted places in the middle of the night. Repeat nightly for 1-2 weeks for minor sprains or strains and up to a month for severe cartilage damage or bone breaks. Even old injuries can respond to this remedy.

\*Dry comfrey root can be used, as well. Simply reconstitute it with some luke warm water, just enough to moisten and plump it up. Then run it through a food processor to release the mucilage and be sure to add the ginger. Proceed as above. Clients report this is a more difficult method, but still effective.

#### Sample Recipe #2: Combination Compress for Soft Tissue Injury

I have seen this work to prevent surgery in severe knee ligament injury on numerous occasions.

2g solomon's seal – promotes elasticity of soft tissue, esp. tendons, also promotes tissue repair  
2g comfrey root – promote tissue healing  
2g echinacea - protects collagen, immune stimulant  
2g gotu kola – supports collagen repair, prevents scarring  
2g yarrow – anti-inflammatory  
1g ginger – circulatory stim/anti-inflammatory  
1g juniper – circulatory stimulant, traditional rheumatic herb

Dose: 12 g/day (about 4 Tbsp) made into two stage tea (decoct roots, then infuse leaves, etc.). Strain and apply as a warm compress and leave on as long as possible each day for 2-4 weeks. Ideally, 1 cup of this brew would also be taken internally, sipped throughout day. However you may choose to remove the comfrey root, particularly if consuming for more than a week or so. This is a matter of personal comfort with the potential risks of ingesting pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which is a matter of great debate among herbalists today.

See these resources for more information:

<http://herbcraft.org/hoffmanncomfrey.html>

<http://eclecticschoolofherbalmedicine.com/comfrey-and-liver-damage/>

## **B. Pain**

chronic muscular or nerve inflammation/damage (sciatica, disc issues, carpal tunnel), joint pain, muscle cramps (skeletal, respiratory, digestive and uterine)

### Sample Recipe #1: Neuromuscular Pain Liniment

Prepared like tinctures, using vinegar, alcohol, or rubbing alcohol as your menstruum, liniments are generally used to draw, warm, dry, disinfect and/or heal wounds, bruises, sprains, burns, and sunburns, increase circulation, and soothe strained muscles and soft tissue.

Note: Liniments are for external purposes only, especially when made with rubbing alcohol or when containing low-dose plants, as in the recipe below.

This liniment is a combination of oils and tinctures, which will naturally separate and must be shaken before each application. You can switch around the formula and the preparations of each herb depending on what's available (e.g. yarrow and comfrey tinctures could be used instead of oils, just as lobelia and datura oils could be substituted for tinctures). The blend of alcohol-based preps with oils provides a rudimentary time-release, as the alcohol extractives will penetrate more quickly and the oil will hold some constituents on the surface for a while.

This formula has done wonders for a number of clients with chronic sciatica, degenerative disc issues, severe muscular spasm or strain, and situations where it's unclear what's at the root of pain—nerve or soft tissue damage. This could even stand in for a chest rub for spastic coughs or restricted breathing, in a pinch.

Equal parts:

yarrow oil (can sub arnica)

comfrey root or leaf oil (can exchange for St. John's wort when nerve pain is prominent)

lobelia tincture

datura (*Datura stramonium*) tincture

*\*datura is a potentially harmful botanical; label well and don't use the tincture internally without solid understanding of its effects; topical use is safe and effective in this formula*

Essential oils of wintergreen, ginger, and others can make nice additions (20-40 total drops of essential oil per ounce of above blend)

### Sample Recipe #2: Hot Ginger Compress

This is a basically miraculous home remedy, long used in formal Chinese and Japanese medicine, as well as in the folk healing traditions of these cultures. Ultimately, if used on the lower back, this compress can deeply warm the Kidneys, restoring the Kidney yang and generally warming the core of the body, enlivening the spirit and restoring a person from exhaustion. Of course, part of the remedy is the long horizontal rest that must accompany it. But, it is undeniably effective at chasing away fatigue and stress, in addition to muscle spasms. It can be applied to specific skeletal muscles as needed, as well as to the abdomen for digestive spasm or menstrual cramps. It can also be applied to injured or painful joints. The

lungs won't complain about a chest application, either. Ideally, you will have a partner to do this with/for you, especially for the traditional Kidney treatment.

a "hand" of fresh ginger (at least a total of 6 inches of fat rhizome)  
water  
an absorbent cotton cloth big enough to cover the affected area  
2 large towels  
a pan with a lid

Grate the ginger into the pot and cover with 1-2 quarts of water (more for larger areas). Cover and bring the water to a boil, then simmer for 15 minutes. Allow the water to cool just until you can put your hands into it. Don't wait too long. Lie face down comfortably, on one of the towels. Soak your cloth in the tea and wring it out, then recover the tea to keep it warm. Place the cloth onto the lower back (or other appropriate area), cover with the second towel (and even blankets) and lie quietly until the warmth dissipates. Remove the cloth and soak it once again in the tea, wringing it out and placing it again on the back. Repeat until the tea is no longer warm enough to use (pro-tip: use a crock pot or other slow warmer to keep your tea warm next to your client or loved one, which will extend the treatment period). If an hour can be spent with the compresses, that's ideal.

#### Sample Recipe #3: Artemisia Oil

Like a moxa treatment in a bottle, I like to make oil from various Artemisia species (especially *A. vulgaris*, *A. ludoviciana*, *A. princeps*) and use this for purposes similar to moxa. One can use heat applied over the oil or even an oil soaked cloth for long-lasting, penetrating effect. This is especially useful for muscle and soft tissue inflammation and pain, as well as menstrual and digestive spasm or stagnation. I use it very similarly to yarrow or arnica oils. This can also be used as part of the cupping process, especially for moving the cups.

Follow usual oil preparation protocols, using olive oil along with wilted or freshly dried mugwort, etc. This can be made into a salve, as well, but the wax will dilute the strength of the prep slightly.

#### Sample "Recipe" #4: Urtication (stinging with fresh nettles)

Never overlook the value of a good nettle sting. Lashing oneself with nettles is an ancient European method for reducing pain and improving mobility in arthritic joints, sciatica, gout, and non-healing soft-tissue injuries. While many folks don't have access to fresh nettles, if you do, it's a cheap and useful approach. This is similar to using a mustard plaster to increase circulation (and inflammation), sometimes called counter-irritation. It's a bit like fighting fire with fire. While the initial result is pain and some redness, the nettle-caused inflammation tends to reduce the pre-existing pain and swelling, and often speeds healing if the pain is due to injury. It is most effective if done regularly, but does work acutely.

Note: some folks are really reactive to the cocktail of chemistry found in the nettle sting and it's more painful and lasting than it's worth. Be sure to do a "spot check" to be sure you're not one of those folks before you beat yourself silly with nettles on my account!

#### **C. Skin or mucus membrane damage/inflammation/infection**

Examples: wounds, bacterial and fungal skin infections/cellulitis, herpes, conjunctivitis, eye strain mastitis, vaginitis, ear infection, dermatitis (esp. poison oak, bites/stings, etc.), teething, dental pain, hemorrhoids, varicose veins

### Sample Recipe #1: Herpes Virus (e.g. cold sores) Paste

At the first sign of an outbreak, begin taking lemon balm and St. John's wort tea or tinctures. Reduce stress and arginine intake. As long as there is no lesion, apply oils or salves including the above herbs, as well, which may avert an outbreak altogether.

Once an outbreak appears (red, oozing/open, painful), create the following paste and apply and leave on (overnight works well). A compress using these herbs as tea also works, but is harder to keep on the affected area. Once the lesion has dried and crusted over, oils or salves can be used again to speed healing.

Bentonite or other clay or marshmallow powder

Small amount of any combination of St. John's wort, licorice and/or lemon balm tinctures, enough to make a thick paste

### Sample Recipe #2: Green (or Black) Tea Eye Poultice

This is an extremely easy method to reduce eye inflammation and pain from a variety of causes (e.g. smoke exposure, excessively dry air, animal or pollen allergies, pink eye, eye strain from screen use). Simply soak two tea bags in enough boiling water to just moisten the bags and then allow them to cool. Keep the bags protected while cooling (as it's important that they not introduce new microbes into your eyes). You can even put them in the freezer in plastic freezer bags after a few minutes to cool them faster or to save for later if they're needed often. Once they are cool enough to feel comfortable, lie down and then place a tea bag on each eye. Some fluid will likely seep out, so you might want to place a towel under your head to catch any drips.

For some concerns, like pink eye, folks also like eye baths which do a better job of washing the eye and getting more herbal tea onto the conjunctiva (the mucous membrane that lines the eye and eyelid). You generally need an eye cup for this and it's a bit more involved, but worthwhile if you have the tools and time. Green or black tea would be equally useful in this application, as would many other astringent, anti-microbial and anti-inflammatory herbs, such as chamomile, rose, or geranium.

### **D. Fever/chills**

Nothing beats the hot ginger compress on the lower back for warming up the body to mount a nice strong healthy fever response. When we need to be hotter than we are to slow viral or bacterial replication, the hypothalamus increases our temperature set point so that we feel cold and so, bundle up, drink warm fluids and stay inside. This all supports our febrile response, as does using warming teas with garlic, ginger and cayenne, for example.

Various washes and baths or cool forehead compresses can also be used to help cool down a fever that is too high or just exhausting a person without a break. A cool yarrow, boneset or elder sponge bath is great for kids and adults alike. Even the cool water can take a fever down enough to be manageable, but the herbs expand the effect. Drinking teas of these same herbs will also be helpful.

### Sample Recipe: Fever Bath

4 ounces of yarrow (or boneset, etc.)

1 gallon boiling water

Steep the herb, covered, for 15-30 minutes, strain and, once cooled, either use as sponge bath, a compress, or add to full bath.

### **E. Energy, Mood, Cognition**

Fatigue/exhaustion, stress, anxiety, worry, depression, grief, lack of focus, lack of motivation

Again, a hot ginger compress can do wonders for fatigue, especially in folks who tend towards cold or stagnant states. It's positively restorative. An invigorating steam with aromatic herbs can also be quite transformative, specifically via the aromatherapeutic effects on the limbic system (and so the rest of the neuroendocrine system). Oil-based preps and water baths (even foot or hand baths) containing aromatic plants (e.g. lavender, rose, mints, lemon balm, rosemary, mugwort) are also especially suited to enlivening and relaxing the frazzled and exhausted mind and spirit.

My favorite approach, however, is to use sweeping or brushing with fresh herbs. In Spanish-speaking areas in Central and South America, this is often referred to as *limpia* (referring to being clean or clear). I first learned to sweep as *limpia* from curandera Angélica Flores in Mexico and later again from Ecuadorian herbalist, Rocio Alarcon. But, sweeping is not a culturally bound practice. Most cultures have at one time or still do use some version of brushing or gently striking the body with herbs for the purpose of bringing change, letting go of what's no longer useful, and inviting in the new. For example, Scandinavian traditions include sweeping and gently beating the body with birch and/or evergreen branches to keep the blood moving and enliven the skin as part of sweating and bathing practices. Whether we mean to cleanse ourselves spiritually or physically (or both), sweeping with fresh plants can be invigorating, and at the same time quite relaxing, on all levels.

#### Sample "Recipe": Fresh Herb Sweeping

Plants in the rose, aster and mint families are all safe to use and tend to be aromatic when crushed and gently beat against the body. One can choose more cooling or relaxing plants or more warming or stimulating plants for specific effects or people, but almost any combination of the below herbs will have a generally positive effect.

Plants great for all-purpose sweeping: lavender, rosemary, mints, bee balms, lemon balm, calendula, fennel, geranium, sages, anise hyssop, artemisias, roses (care w/thorns!), meadowsweet, jasmine...

As with the hot ginger compress, we can do this alone, but it's 100% more lovely if done by someone else. I recommend a sweeping trade—it can take as little as 30 minutes to pick your herbs, sweep each person and clean up. The benefit for the person giving the sweeping is just as significant as receiving; the simple act of bringing our attention to the present for the benefit of another has positive impact. Plus, we get to smell the lovely plant aromas emanating from the sweeping bundle right along with the recipient.

When the sweeping is done, the plant material is spent and should be placed somewhere that it can return to the earth, ideally not in the house or in the common outdoor living spaces. We want to affirm the intention of letting go of whatever has been brushed away or transformed through the sweeping process.

### **F. Pleasure**

**Laying leaves and flowers on my body, while resting and letting my being recognize the presence and receive the gifts of the plants is my favorite application of topical herbalism.**

There is no recipe—follow your delight and curiosity. What does a big, heart-shaped linden leaf feel like if I bruise it and lay it across my brow? How do calendula flowers covering my closed eyes change my vision? How does crushed mint affect my breath when placed on my chest? What happens if I draw a cool bath in the evening heat and fill it with fresh flowers from my garden?

**Be creative, collaborate with the plants as the wise and joyful beings they are, and find what soothes, excites and delights you.**