

## CAM: HERBS AND MS, PART 2

# Common herbs and common MS symptoms

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In the Spring 2008 **Momentum**, we wrote about herbs in a general way, including the relationship between medications and herbs, and some general precautions. This is an overview of herbs that may be useful for common MS symptoms.

### Psyllium for constipation

This readily available herb can help. Psyllium, a form of dietary fiber, or roughage, is used mainly for its mucilage, a gooey gel from the psyllium seed coat. Psyllium is found in products like Metamucil.

Many clinical studies have shown that psyllium effectively treats constipation. It acts as a bulk-producing agent when it comes in contact with water. Stool, made larger with psyllium, is more readily moved through the intestines.

It's important to tell your physician about any dietary supplements or CAM treatments you are considering or taking. It's equally important that your physician listen respectfully to your questions and concerns regarding CAM.

Six herbs that may help common MS symptoms.

In addition, several studies suggest that a diet that includes the fiber found in psyllium can reduce cholesterol. Indeed, this is why some breakfast cereals that contain fiber claim to reduce cholesterol. There may be other benefits, too, such as decreased blood pressure and even a lower mortality rate from heart disease.

Psyllium is usually well tolerated. However, if fluid intake is insufficient, it can cause choking or bowel obstruction. Each dose of psyllium should be accompanied by a full glass (8 oz.) of water.

### Coffee for fatigue and poor attention

Coffee is one of the most widely used herbs in the world. Most adults have some personal experience with the way in which coffee affects alertness and energy. This is due to one of its chemical constituents, caffeine. For many people with MS, coffee has obvious potential benefit.

Other sources of caffeine include tea, chocolate, cola nut, mate, and guarana. Caffeine is also available as a dietary supplement. Coffee and some other caffeine-containing herbs are generally considered safe by the FDA. However, the FDA recommends that pregnant women avoid or limit caffeine due to



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an association with miscarriages and low birth-weight babies. Mate should be used with caution or not at all because it has been associated with liver problems and cancer of the throat and bladder.

There are some other precautions: caffeine may worsen MS-associated bladder problems. (To find out, try slowly decreasing and then discontinuing caffeine intake over a few weeks.) Caffeine may also increase the risk of osteoporosis. High doses may produce anxiety, insomnia, heart palpitations, upset stomach, nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure, tremors, muscle twitching, and increased cholesterol levels.

### **Cranberry to prevent urinary tract infections**

People with MS, especially those who tend to retain urine, are at an increased risk of urinary tract infections (UTIs) and UTIs can cause serious health problems, including an increase in neurological symptoms like weakness and fatigue.

At least among people with healthy bladder function, there is some evidence that cranberry decreases the frequency of UTIs. Unfortunately, it is less clear whether cranberry prevents UTIs among people with abnormal bladder function caused by MS or other neurological problems.

It is quite clear that people with MS should never use cran-

CAM stands for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a group of diverse therapies and products that are neither part of conventional medicine as taught in U.S. medical schools, nor generally available at U.S. hospitals. The practice of using an unconventional therapy together with conventional medicine is called “complementary medicine.”



berry to treat existing infections. On the other hand, it may be reasonable to attempt to **prevent** infections with cranberry given that this is a low-risk approach.

The doses suggested for prevention are 1–10 oz. of juice daily. Cranberry juice cocktail, which some people find more palatable, is only 26–33% juice. Six capsules of dried powder or 1.5 oz. of frozen or fresh cranberries is roughly equivalent to 3 oz. of juice.

Cranberry is generally well tolerated. Consuming more

than a quart a day (32 oz.) over a prolonged period of time may increase the risk of kidney stones. Cranberry may also interact with blood-thinning medications, such as warfarin (Coumadin). In very large doses, for example a gallon a day (128 oz.), cranberry can cause gastrointestinal upset and diarrhea.

### **St. John's wort for mild depression**

St. John's wort is a yellow-flowering perennial herb native to Europe, which now grows wild in many American meadows. Its name is based on the fact that it was traditionally harvested on June 24th, St. John's day. The most important traditional use is to treat depression, and St. John's wort contains several possibly active ingredients, including hyperforin and hypericin. The herb has effects on neurotransmitters in the brain that are similar to the effects of some widely used prescription antidepressants.

Many small studies and one influential “meta-analysis” (a study that pools multiple other studies) concluded that St. John's wort is indeed effective for treatment of mild-to-moderate depression. Subsequently, two more studies have contradicted this finding. Thus, there is no uniformity of scientific opinion. None of these studies were conducted specifically among people with MS and depression.

Depression, especially severe depression, can lead to devastating consequences. It should be diagnosed and treated by a health-care expert. In any case, St. John's wort should not be used for severe depression.

This herb can affect the potency of some prescription medications, including, importantly, birth control pills. So it is important to discuss the use of St. John's wort with your physician or other health-care provider.

### **Ginkgo biloba to improve memory**

The ginkgo biloba is a unique tree valued for both culinary and medicinal purposes. The ginkgo leaf contains some complex and interesting plant chemicals (technically flavonoids and terpenes) that have potentially useful effects in the body. Ginkgo can protect cells against damage caused by free radicals and potentially improve blood flow by inhibiting a compound in the body that causes blood to clot.

There is reasonably good though not conclusive evidence that ginkgo may help with the dementia of Alzheimer's disease and other age-related thinking problems. Given that possibility, it is natural to wonder if ginkgo might improve thinking among people with MS. Two small preliminary studies suggest



that it may. Another small study indicates that ginkgo improves fatigue in MS. Further studies are needed to confirm these early findings.

Ginkgo biloba is generally safe, but because it can inhibit blood clotting, it should be avoided by people who take blood-thinning medications (warfarin, or Coumadin) or aspirin, people who have bleeding disorders, and people who are undergoing surgery. In addition, ginkgo biloba may increase the risk of seizures among people who are susceptible to them.

### **Valerian for better sleep**

Valerian, made from the root of a flowering plant and said to smell like dirty socks, has been

used since ancient times for its calming and sleep-inducing properties. A number of studies have suggested that valerian may indeed promote sleep. The effects seem to require daily use for two to four weeks (as opposed to sporadic use on an "as needed" basis). Valerian is also used to manage anxiety and spasticity, but there is less published research to support these uses.

Valerian is usually well tolerated, although it may worsen MS-related fatigue, especially if taken in combination with other

sedating medications such as baclofen (Lioresal), tizanidine (Zanaflex), diazepam (Valium), or alcohol. Other side effects may include headache, liver toxicity and—paradoxically—excitability and insomnia.

### **Conclusion**

Herbs may be of use in managing some common and serious MS symptoms. Like conventional medications, however, there are always risks to consider—especially in special situations such as pregnancy, lactation, or when other diseases are present. For more detailed information, see Dr. Bowling's book, **Complementary and Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis, 2nd Edition**, or go to [ms-cam.org](http://ms-cam.org).