

Materia Medica for the Nervous system

Guido Masé / Grian Herbs 2010

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Cooling nervines

Scullcap leaf

Safest of all the cooling nervines, and also very effective in over-stimulated conditions. The tincture of the fresh herb is very good, at doses of ½ tsp three times a day between meals. A tea of the dry herb can be made as well, though I find that more tonic and less calming.

Lemon Balm leaf

The “gladdening herb” that is specifically indicated with more depressive tendencies, or if there is a lot of digestive wind. Its energy actually tends toward warmth, and astringency. It makes an excellent tea.

Blue Vervain leaf and flower

A more powerful digestive stimulant that is also an excellent nerve for “excess” constitutions. It cools and is extremely bitter. The dose of tincture is ¼ to ½ tsp 15 minutes before every meal.

Feverfew leaf

Another very cooling, bitter nervine that is most indicated in cases of recurrent headaches and migraines. Although some have taken the tea, I prefer the tincture at a dose of ½ to 1 tsp two or three times a day.

Chamomile flower

Tending more towards warmth, this calmative is famous for relaxing colic in infants. It helps overanxious adults as well, especially if there is digestive spasming, pain, and wind. The tea is the only way to go: start with two cups a day.

Wood Betony leaf

An herb which was much more *en vogue* in the past, it helps for chronic headaches and a feeling of tightness or oppression in the chest. The tea works well, or a tincture taken at ½ tsp doses a few times a day.

Hops strobiles

A deeply bitter, sedating remedy. I use it in the short-term only, for insomnia where it works quite well. Take ½ tsp of tincture in a little water about 30 minutes before bed. Contraindicated in depression, or for long-term use.

California Poppy whole plant

A milder sedative nervine, especially useful in children to help with teething pain. It is also useful for adults, as part of formulas for insomnia especially if there is early morning waking and restlessness. The tincture of the fresh plant is taken at doses of 5-10 drops for children, ¼ to 1 tsp for adults.

Motherwort leaf

Somewhat of a digestive bitter, this herb is especially useful for the anxiety that can accompany perimenopause, and also if cardiovascular excess is present. Take ¼ tsp of the tincture before every meal.

Warming nervine tonics

Oats tops

The premier nervine tonic, made from the immature seedheads of the oat grain (“milky tops”). It is nourishing, tonifying, and incredibly safe. I use it as the base of almost any nervine formula. The tincture made from the fresh tops is excellent for active, scattered symptoms, and can be taken at dosages of ½ to 2 tsp at least three times daily. The tea of the dried tops is a more long-term rebalancer and has some adaptogenic quality as well.

Hawthorn berry, leaf, flower

Warming, heart-healthy, and calming, this herb can be used as the berry, leaf, or flower. It is useful to build even nervous energy in both depressive and anxious conditions, helping to impart focus and calm without stimulating in any way. Its most common indication is the concomitant presence of cardiovascular disease. Take 1 tsp of the tincture two or three times daily; or make a strong tea; or eat spoonfuls of Hawthorn berry jam.

Rose bud and flower

Emotionally soothing, I’ve found Rose to help rebalance nervous issues that have abuse or abandonment at their root. Aromatherapy works well here; also, glycerin-based extracts. Rose can also feature as part of a nice tea formula, especially to balance it energetically. Another specific indication is “heartburn” (literally).

Ginkgo leaf extract

Recent research points to the standardized extract of this plant as a useful treatment for anxiety. Its main indications are circulatory deficiency and memory/focus issues. Try for 240mg to 480mg of the standardized extract daily.

St. Johnswort flower buds

Use care with this spicy, warming nervine tonic as it interacts with many different medications. Its usefulness is in conditions of depleted, deficient nervous energy – such as depression or insomnia – and its solar connection makes it an excellent adjunct for the “winter blues” that sometimes accompany the shorter days. The dose is between ½ and 2 tsp of the tincture daily.

Adaptogens

Ashwagandha root

This solanaceous root comes to the materia medica from Ayurveda. It is an excellent example of a Yin tonic, nurturing deep strength and specifically helping address the root deficiencies behind insomnia patterns. The powder can be given, 1 or 2 tsp twice daily; alternatively, the tincture works well too, at about ½ to 1 tsp twice daily.

Rhodiola root

Also known as “arctic root” or “golden root”, the extract of this rose-flavored plant is an incredible tonic for low energy states, lack of focus, and depression. It has an invigorating, Yang quality while at the same time not being too stimulating. I generally suggest it for relatively limited periods of time (2-6 months) or on an as-needed basis (1-2 days a week). The dose ranges from 60 to 120 drops twice daily, but not later than 3pm.

American Ginseng root

“Root of Kings”, life-enhancer, premier tonic, panacea: ginseng has been called many things, and with good reason. Our American variety is very tonifying to the Yin, and is especially indicated for conditions of depletion, stress, and anxiety in folks over 40. Chew on pieces of the root, or take a tincture at the dose of ½ teaspoon twice daily.

Licorice root

This is a delicious (to most folks) remedy for conditions of adrenal depletion and stress leading to depression, lack of energy, and lethargy coupled with inflammation in the system (tension, pain, headaches, achiness). It is also a good respiratory tonic helpful in asthma. Use caution in hypertension. The dose is ¼ to 1 tsp twice a day.

Relaxants / Antispasmodics

Valerian root

A warming and somewhat spicy root with a characteristic odor, Valerian is most indicated in frazzled, anxious conditions with cold hands and feet and perhaps a little difficulty falling asleep. It can be habit-forming and abused if the dose is too high or continued for too long. Start with 90 drops in a little water, two to three times a day.

Kava-kava rootstock

This powerful relaxant and anti-anxiety herb is more cooling in nature, and benefits anxious states characterized by deep muscular tension, especially in the neck and shoulders. It is also an effective alternative to prescription anti-anxiety medicines, and aids in supporting the treatment of panic disorders. Take ½ tsp of the tincture in a little water, holding it in your mouth until numbness develops.

Relaxing expectorants

Lobelia leaf and seed

A favorite herb for over 150 years, Lobelia is relaxing to tight respiratory muscles and also aids in the removal of phlegm and congestion. It is an invaluable addition to smoking cessation blends, too! Be careful to only use a little bit, as it can be a strong emetic at higher doses. Start with 10 drops of the tincture in a little water.

Pleurisy root

A neutral-to-warm herb with soothing and relaxing power for chronic, dry cough especially if it causes irritation of the lungs' lining (the pleura). It is also diaphoretic and relaxing to the peripheral tissues, helping to calm the nerves in frazzled, intense respiratory conditions characterized by spasmodic coughs. Take 1 to 2 tsp of the tincture two or three times a day.