

# How to Make Herbal Medicines at Home

## Equipment

- For **tinctures**: Clean jars with tight-fitting lids, labeling materials, 190-proof alcohol from the liquor store, fresh or dried leaves and flowers, dropper bottle, a funnel with a small neck for your dropper bottle.
- For **liniments**: Herbal tincture, sprayer bottle or small sponge, a funnel with a small neck to fill your sprayer or dropper bottle.
- For **oils**: Clean dry jars with tight-fitting lids, labeling materials, olive oil, candy thermometer if desired, fresh or dried leaves and flowers, capsules, dropper, and capsule-making tray if desired.
- For **ointments/salves**: Herbal oil, small jars, beeswax, a fine grater or vegetable peeler.
- For all: Record book, so you can reproduce recipes and dosages that worked well for you, and so you *won't* repeat recipes or dosages that did *not*.

## Tincture recipes

### Herbal tincture using fresh plant:

1. Fill, don't stuff, a jar with leaves and flowers (can chop it enough to fit it into the jar).
2. Fill jar to the top with near-100% ethanol (190-proof alcohol from the liquor store). Cap tightly. Label with date. Seal in a plastic bag or plastic wrap (slows alcohol evaporation), and store in a dark cupboard.
3. Your tincture is ready to use in six weeks. Strain through a nylon stocking, gauze, or coffee filter.
4. Decant into dropper bottles, labeling carefully so you can reproduce the tincture exactly in the future.

### Herbal tincture using dried plant:

1. Put 1 ounce dried leaves/flowers into a quart jar (or 1/2 oz in a 16-oz pint jar, or 1/4 oz in an 8-oz jar).
2. Fill jar to the top with near-100% ethanol (190-proof). Cap tightly. Label with date. Seal in a plastic bag or plastic wrap (slows alcohol evaporation), and store in a dark cupboard.
3. Your tincture is ready to use in six weeks. Strain through a nylon stocking, gauze, or coffee filter.
4. Decant into dropper bottles, labeling carefully so you can reproduce the tincture exactly in the future.

## How to use herbal tinctures

### By mouth, in liquids:

- Put a few drops at a time into hot tea, allowing the alcohol to evaporate as the tea steeps. Record how many drops you used and the result, so you can determine a useful dosage.

Some useful teas: Peppermint for digestion and belly problems, skullcap for nerve pain, passionflower for pain and anxiety, valerian for sleep, feverfew for migraine, etc.

- You can also put tincture into juice or other beverages.

### By mouth, direct (sublingual):

- You can put drops of tincture directly in your mouth, allowing direct absorption through the mouth tissues, without it passing through the digestive tract.

- If you find your tincture is too strong for this use, you can dilute it with water. Record how you diluted it (for example, "Herbal spray, 1 cup tincture diluted with 1 cup water").

- You can also decant tincture into pump spray bottles, as an oral spray. Record how many sprays you used, and the result (for example, "2 sprays orally three times per day, good pain relief").

### Topically, for muscles and joints, as liniment:

A liniment is a tincture (an "alcohol rub") used on the skin, so the medicine soaks into joints and muscles.

- Decant your tincture into pump spray bottles for topical (on the skin) use as a liniment.

- Alternatively, apply drops of tincture to a small sponge, and use this to apply tincture to the affected area.

- Record what time you applied it, so you can determine how long the medicinal effect lasts for you.

- You can top the liniment with a clean cloth and a heating pad to speed absorption.

## Oil recipes

### Infused oil using dried plant:

1. Put 1 ounce dried leaves/flowers into 1 quart of olive oil, in a small cooking pan (or 1/2 oz with 2 cups of oil, or 1/4 oz with 1 cup of oil).
2. Gently warm over low heat to no more than 100F by candy thermometer (like a baby's bath - *not* simmering or boiling! Too much heat can break down the heart-healthy phenols found in olive oil). Maintain the oil and herb at this temperature for 1-2 hours.
3. Remove from the heat. Strain through a fine strainer, nylon stocking, gauze, or coffee filter. Let the oil drip through your strainer overnight to capture all the oil.

## Infused oil using fresh plant:

1. Fill, don't stuff, a DRY jar (bone dry - not dried with a towel) with leaves and flowers. The herbs need to be fresh (live), but DRY to the touch - harvested during the heat of the day, when all the dew has dried, and at least 36 hours after any rainfall. (Damp herbs make moldy oils.)
2. Fill jar to the top with olive oil. Poke the herbs with a long stick or knife to release any air bubbles (air bubbles make mold, too). Top off with oil again. Cap tightly with DRY cap. Label with date.
3. You may want to top off the oil again the next day, if you notice that it has "settled." Cap tightly!
4. Store in a dark cupboard. Your oil is ready to use in six weeks. Strain through a fine strainer, nylon stocking, gauze, or coffee filter. Let the oil drip through your strainer overnight to capture all the oil.

### How to use herbal oils

- Apply oil directly to affected area. Record the time you applied it, to determine how long the effect lasts for you.
- You can put the (cold) oil in capsules, using a dropper and a capsule-making tray.
- You can add beeswax to make an ointment or salve, applying it to affected areas (see below).
- You can cover the area with a hot towel, warm rice bag, or heating pad as desired, to enhance the effect.

### Ointment/salve recipes

1. Grate a small amount of beeswax using a fine grater (or shave using a vegetable peeler). Warm a small amount of herbal oil gently over very low heat. (Write down amounts, for example "1/2 cup herbal oil.")
2. Add some beeswax to the oil; stir well to melt. (Write down amounts, for example "2 Tb grated wax.")
3. Drip some of the mixture on a cool china plate. It will harden immediately, and you can test it to see if you like the consistency.
  - If it is too hard, add a little more oil, warm and mix well, and test it again.
  - If it is too soft, add a little more beeswax, warm and mix well, and test it again.
4. Make sure you record your final measurements, so you can follow the recipe again next time. (Try starting with 4:1 proportions, for example, 4 Tb oil to 1 Tb grated beeswax.)
5. You can start with virgin coconut oil (not hydrogenated), which hardens without beeswax and is also safe for internal use (it can even lower your cholesterol). Hydrogenated coconut oils contain trans fats, which aren't healthy.
  - You can make your herbal oil using arnica, comfrey, calendula, or other medicinal oil (infused, not essential oil), and then make the finished product into salve.
  - You can add a few drops of peppermint essential oil - contains menthol, pain reducer especially for muscles and connective tissues (example: fibromyalgia, TMJ, plantar fasciitis).
  - You can add cayenne pepper (start with 1/2 tsp per 1/2 cup of oil) - contains capsaicin, a pain reducer especially for joints and nerves (example: sciatica, arthritis, peripheral neuropathy).

Caution: wash your hands with soap immediately after using any product with cayenne in it. Keep cayenne oil/salve away from delicate tissues. Do not use under a heating pad, to avoid burns.

  - Experiment to find effective proportions - and don't forget to record your recipes!

### Frequently asked questions

Q: Is it better to use fresh or dried herbs?

A: *Most herbalists believe it is better to use fresh herbs for tinctures and oils. However, many people do not have access to fresh-grown herbs, and are obliged to use dried. (Dried herbs are better than fresh for making water-based teas, infusions, and decoctions.)*

Q: Do I need glycerine to make tincture?

A: *No! Glycerin is a poor solvent (and can be hard on your kidneys). Alcohol and oil are more effective and safer solvents.*

Q: Does a "cold tincture" need to be kept in the freezer?

A: *No! This is a myth. Your tincture will not be as strong if you keep it in the freezer, because cold slows down chemical reactions, including drawing medicine into solvent.*

Q: Do I cook the finished tincture, to get the alcohol out?

A: *No! This will leave you with a hard-to-use, sticky mess. Put tincture in hot tea, to make alcohol evaporate.*

Q: Do I need to chop, grind, or sieve my dried herbs?

Q: Do I need to bake the fresh herb in the oven before using, to "activate" it?

Q: Do I need to shake the tincture or oil every day?

A: *No! All of these activities are unnecessary.*

Q: If olive oil is good, wouldn't essential oil be better?

A: *No! Essential oils are strong and often caustic - not for internal use. Olive oil is safe internally and externally.*

Q: Do I need to boil the herb in oil, or stir it constantly while preparing it?

A: *No! Be gentle, use low heat, and take it easy.*

Q: Where can I get beeswax, dropper bottles, spray bottles, capsules and capsule makers, etc.?

A: *If your local natural food or herb store does not carry these, you can order them online from any herbal warehouse. Locally, try GloryBee ([glorybee.com](http://glorybee.com)) and Mountain Rose ([mountainroseherbs.com](http://mountainroseherbs.com)). You can always call and ask how to obtain specific equipment.*