

dr leigh's approach to herbal medicines

most of this information has been learned from my prime herbal gurus, susun weed and michael moore (bless his memory). see endnotes for their websites.

this might be a different approach than ones you already know or have read about. it's very similar to my approach to family medicine, which is generally slow, simple, and holistic.

i recommend that you follow these guidelines:

1. know your needs!

obtain a specific herbal recommendation from a holistic care provider who understands your entire situation, so you don't worsen one problem while treating another.

2. know your herbs!

obtain the information you need, to understand why your medicine may be appropriate, how it works, and how to properly prepare it. find out the latin name, to make sure you're using the correct medicine.

3. keep it simple!

start with a "simple," a single herb (not a combination of multiple herbs), so you can evaluate its success and any unwanted side effects.

when you have arrived at a few favorite simples, consult your doctor or herbalist to formulate safe and effective combinations, if desired.

4. keep it fresh!

obtain bulk herbs from a supplier with whom you can communicate, if necessary, about where your herbs are grown and how they are processed. for example, for people living in oregon, consider mountain rose herbs, located in eugene, and pacific botanicals, located in grants pass.

consider wild-crafting (gathering fresh wild herbs, if they are not endangered species) or garden-raising and hand-making your own herbal medicines.

5. go gently!

process your herbs as little as practical. don't roughly boil them in water or oil; don't bake or toast them at high temperatures. let time, air, and simple solvents (water, honey, dilute alcohols, olive oil) do the work for you. plan ahead, so you won't be in a hurry.

i don't recommend using pre-made capsules or tablets, which in my opinion are usually overprocessed.

(imagine how nutritious a spinach leaf would be, if you powdered it, made it into a pill, and left it sitting on a grocery shelf for a few months! ...not very.)

6. be a cheapskate!

to find the herbal medicine that works best for you, buy small amounts of individual commercial preparations, and give them a fair trial (usually a month or so, for chronic or persistent problems), also following the above guidelines. when you know what you want, strongly consider making your own, using standardized techniques. this will keep your medications affordable and reliable.

example: a 1-oz bottle of echinacea tincture costs \$8.50 from one herb supplier, but you can make 2 quarts for about the same cost, from the same supplier, using 4 oz. echinacea root and some dilute grain alcohol.

example: 100 saw palmetto capsules, about 2 ounces' worth, cost \$9.25 from one supplier, but a whole pound of powder only costs \$11 from the same supplier. (500 empty capsules cost about \$5... but a tincture would be better!)

some basic herbal medicines that dr leigh has recommended in individual situations:

alfalfa	cinnamon	eyebright	horsetail	saw palmetto
aloe	cleavers (bedstraw)	fennel seed	licorice root	senna
angelica (dong quai)	cloves	fenugreek	marshmallow (malva)	skullcap
arnica	cohosh, black/blue	feverfew	milk thistle	slippery elm
artemisia	coltsfoot	garlic	motherwort	squawvine (mitchella)
blessed thistle	comfrey	gentian	mullein	st. john's wort
burdock	cornsilk	ginger	nettles	trillium
cannabis	crampbark (black haw)	ginkgo	oregon grape	turmeric
catnip	dandelion	ginseng	osha	uva ursi
cayenne	echinacea	goldenseal	peppermint	valerian
chamomile	elder	grindelia	queen anne's lace	wild yam
chaste tree	elephanthead (betony)	hawthorn (crateagus)	red clover	witch hazel
chickweed	ephedra (ma huang)	hops	red raspberry	yarrow
chokecherry	epimedium (horny goat)	horehound	rhubarb root	yellow dock

the following page gives instructions for basic herbal preparations.

basic instructions for making herbal medicines

infusion:

this is basically a strong tea. when we dry herbs, it breaks open the cell walls so the contents can be drawn out by hot water. best for herbs containing water-soluble chemicals, especially tender leaves, flowers, fruits, and "whole plants."
examples: feverfew, senna, slippery elm, mugwort, cleavers, dandelion, red clover...

instructions:

put 1 oz dried herb in a quart jar; fill jar with boiled water, and cap. allow to stand approx 24 hrs. strain, squeezing herbs well & collecting the liquid. may top off with boiled water to make a full quart. store well sealed in refrigerator.

dosage:

varies widely between herbs. however, a typical starting dosage is 1/2 cup (about 4 ounces), 2-4 times daily.

decoction:

this is a stronger tea, best for tougher plant parts, such as most tree barks, sticks, and non-aromatic roots, as well as plants with leathery leaves.

examples: witch hazel, wild cherry, willow, crampbark, dandelion root, yellow dock...

instructions:

put 1 oz dried herb in a nonreactive cooking vessel (glass, corningware, etc); cover with 1 quart water (4 cups), & gently bring to a boil. turn down heat & simmer about ten minutes. remove from heat, cover, allow to stand until cool. strain, squeezing herbs well and collecting the liquid. may top off with boiled water to make a full quart. store well sealed in refrigerator.

dosage:

varies widely between herbs. however, a typical starting dosage is 1/2 cup (about 4 ounces), 2-4 times daily.

tincture:

a dropper bottle preparation, using alcohol to extract the medicinal properties of an herb.

obviously, this is the best way to prepare herbs containing chemicals that are incompletely water-soluble.

examples: echinacea, the cohoshes, valerian, chaste tree, hawthorn, oregon grape root...

instructions:

at first, start by buying a single bottle of a commercial preparation. if the medicine works for you, you can make your own. for instructions on making tinctures at home using fresh or dried plants, please ask me, see an herbalist, consult with your herb supplier, or refer to:

- susun weed's simple instructions at http://www.susunweed.com/herbal_ezine/May04/healingwise.htm
- michael moore's somewhat more advanced online manuals at <http://www.swsbm.com/ManualsMM/DryTinct.txt> and <http://www.swsbm.com/ManualsMM/FEHerbs.txt>

(reason: tinctures may take different concentrations of alcohol, from 65% for passionflower to 90% for black cohosh.)

dosages:

varies widely between herbs. however, a typical starting dosage is 20-40 drops in water, 2-4 times daily.

i would count how many drops are in a "full" dropper of your medicine. most 1-oz bottle droppers hold around 30 drops. 20 drops = about 1 mL, and 50 drops = about 1/2 tsp.

oil*, ointment, salve or balm:

this is like a "tea" that uses oil instead of water, and may be thickened with beeswax to make a salve. good for herbs whose chemicals are fat-soluble, or when using on a part of the body that would benefit from a fatty or waxy medication. honey may also be added - sticky, but adds to healing effect.

examples: chickweed, arnica, garlic, mullein, comfrey, calendula...

instructions:

for oil, fill a jar with *fresh* plant matter, dry to the touch (not dewy; water droplets can cause the plant to mold inside the oil). cover with olive oil. poke into the jar with a chopstick to let out any air bubbles. top off the oil. label, date, tightly cap, and store in a cool, dark place 1-3 months.

pour off the oil & strain, collecting the additional oil. label, date, & store tightly capped in a cool, dark place.

for salve, gently warm your herbal oil over very low heat. finely grate pure beeswax to make 1/2 to 1 Tb of shavings per ounce of oil (example, for 1 cup of oil, add about 8 Tb fluffy grated beeswax). remove oil from heat & stir in beeswax until melted. test consistency by dripping a drop onto a cool plate. if it is too firm, add a little more oil; if it is too liquid, add a little more beeswax, & so on, until just right. pour ointment into clean dry glass containers, & allow to cool completely at room temperature before capping. label, date, & store in cool dark place.

dosage:

apply small amount to clean, dry area, 2-4 times a day. consult doctor/herbalist before use on open wound/broken skin.

**not* "essential oils," which are extremely concentrated preparations that should *not* be used without careful dilution.

information from susun weed: http://www.susunweed.com/Weed_letter_Archive.htm
much much more at <http://www.susunweed.com>

information from michael moore: <http://www.swsbm.com/ManualsMM/MansMM.html>
much much more at <http://www.swsbm.com/homepage/HomePage.html>