

# Hedgerow Herbals

The quarterly newsletter from your local herbalist - Julie Dore  
Articles, news, recipes and tips for a healthier you

## January 2005

This quarter's issue will look at why we all get more colds and flu in the winter, how you can reduce the risk of catching a cold and how to soothe those sore and stuffed up symptoms we all dread so much. Plus are you SAD? And healthy New Year Resolutions.

### **COLDS - CARRY ON KISSING**

"Don't kiss me, I've got a cold", a common cry as the winter wraps us all in its chilly grey blanket. But actually it's not kissing but shaking hands that spreads colds.

Like avoiding kissing there are many other myths about catching a cold.

- ◆ You don't get one by walking in the rain
- ◆ being chilled in the cold weather

So why do many people suffer from colds more in the winter months?

- ◆ We spend more time indoors which helps with the person-to-person spread
- ◆ cold viruses survive better in low humidity conditions i.e. centrally heated buildings
- ◆ dry, cold nasal passages are more vulnerable to viral infection.

The virus lives in the nose and nasal passages and can be spread through airborne droplets when we sneeze or cough. However most infections are by hand contact. When we touch or blow our nose our hands become covered with the virus, everything or body we touch is infected. When that person touches their nose, mouth or eyes the virus has found a new home. Washing hands thoroughly and often, especially after blowing your nose, is vital to stop the spread. And don't forget to dry hands as wet hands carry more germs.

Viruses cause colds and there are over 200 different ones, which is why a vaccine against the "common cold" is not a possibility - it's just too common! So when we contract one virus and develop a resistance to that one its cousin comes along and infects us. Immunity also wears off over time so you can catch the same cold virus again in several years time. Consequently pre-school children can suffer 10-12 colds per year, whereas adults who will have developed immunity against some varieties

get about 3 on average. So if an average cold lasts a week that means on average we suffer 5 years worth of colds in a lifetime, and that's a lot of tissues!

The symptoms we get, sore throat, running nose, raised temperature and cough are our body's attempt to get rid of the virus. Complications include sinusitis, ear infections and for people with weakened respiratory systems (e.g. smokers) chest infections following a cold. These occur when bacterial infections build up in the mucus produced to get rid of the cold virus. Therefore it is only these conditions that respond to anti-biotics, which have no effect on the actually cold virus.

So if there is no vaccine or cure what can we do to prevent the misery of a cold? Well quite a bit actually. Ensuring your immune system is functioning well is vital as this is your main defence when you contact any virus. Tiredness and stress, both short and long term deplete, your immunity. Experiments performed on students taking exams and on carers of sick relatives showed they were more likely to succumb to illnesses when deliberately infected than groups of people not subject to significant stress<sup>1</sup>. Other investigations have shown it is not the level of stress but how you deal with it that has a huge effect on the immune system. In other words having a positive outlook on life is a great cold preventative<sup>2</sup>. A study by Dr S Cohen in 1997 found that people with few friends were four times more likely to come down with cold symptoms after infection than people with a good social support system<sup>3</sup>. Therefore to boost your immune system you need to ensure adequate sleep, exercise (but not to excess), avoid over refined foods like sugar and white flour, eat plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and protein as these contain important nutrients plus reduce stress and talk to your friends –but don't shake hands!!

There are plenty of herbs to help prevent colds or reduce their effect if you do succumb. Echinacea taken frequently at the first sign of a cold boosts the immune system so you fight off the cold more quickly<sup>4</sup>.

Here are some herbal teas you can try:

#### **"Sniffle No More" Tea**

1 part Peppermint (a decongestant)

1/2 part Yarrow (encourages sweating)

1 part Elderflowers (nose and throat tonic)

You can add 2cm piece of fresh ginger root grated (helps with nausea and aches associated with the cold).

Cover the mixed ingredients with boiling water, cover and leave to brew for 15-20 mins. Take as soon as you feel a cold coming on to help the body re-establish its balance.

#### **Bug Buster Tea** (a powerful mix of anti-viral and bacterial plants for when things get tough)

1/2 part fresh grated ginger root

1 pt rose hips

Bring to boil and simmer for 5-10 mins

Then add:

1 pt sage leaves

1 part Thyme leaves

1/2 part peppermint leaves

Cover and steep for 15-20 mins

Just before drinking add 1-2 drops of Echinacea tincture and 1 tsp of Elderflower tincture

**Baby Sniffles-** One for the kids (large and small!)

*This soothing tea helps fight colds and calms the tummy and nerves*

2 part lemon balm  
1 part catnip  
1 part elderflowers  
1 part fennel (fresh leaves or dried seeds)  
1 part rose hips  
1/4 part ginger root grated  
lemon juice and honey to taste

Cover all except lemon and honey with boiling water, cover and leave to brew for 15-20 mins. Then add lemon and honey. Will keep in a fridge for several days. For babies give 1 tsp three times a day, for children between 1/4 -1/2 teacup three times per day.

**Comfort for that sore throat-**then brew fresh sage leaves (not purple or variegated types as they have less of the active ingredients that the plain green culinary variety *Salvia officinalis*) in boiling water for 20 minutes, drain and cool. Add fresh lemon juice to taste and use as a gargle as required.

**Coughs-**Hedgerow Herbals cough mix based on Thyme and Liquorice is great for chesty coughs, and it tastes good too! Include onions and garlic in your diet. Adding two whole bulbs of crushed garlic cloves to 450g of honey can make garlic honey. Take half a teaspoon 3-6 times daily to prevent chest infections (for infants rub on the soles of the feet). The oils in the garlic disinfect the lungs.

In addition if you do succumb to the virus:

- ◆ Cut down on foods that allow the body to increase mucus production, e.g. dairy, bananas and oranges
- ◆ Increase your fluid intake with water, herbal tea and juices ( the juice of half a lemon, honey and pinch of ginger powder added to hot water is a good combination)
- ◆ Take a vitamin C (1000mg while you have symptoms) and zinc supplement
- ◆ Rest and allow your body to recover

And feel better soon

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## **Feeling Blue, Hate the Clocks Going Back? Maybe you're SAD!**

Figures show that up to 20% of us are affected by varying degrees of depression in the winter months with 2% suffering severe symptoms. Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, was first recognized in 1845 but was not officially named until the early 1980's. The most difficult months are January and February with women twice as likely to be affected than men (it is one of the few conditions reported to improve after the menopause). Depression is only one of a number of distressing symptoms that include sleep problems, mood swings, memory loss, difficulty coping with stress, overeating (especially cravings for sugary and starchy foods), lethargy, reduced libido, digestive problems, joint pains and a lowered resistance to infection.

The cause of SAD is not certain but there appears to be a link between the amount of light falling on the eyes and the production of certain messenger chemicals in the brain resulting in the reduction in daylight shifting our biological clock. One such chemical is melatonin, which in animals is known to regulate seasonal behaviour such as reproduction and hibernation and in humans controls our normal sleep patterns. Another is serotonin and it is involved in controlling mood, sleep, sex drive and temperature regulation. If it is not present in sufficient quantities, or if levels are widely fluctuating, all of these activities will be affected. It is very important to realize your symptoms are not imagined but a result of changes in your brain chemistry. Therefore drugs that increase serotonin levels can help, e.g. Prozac, but what are the alternatives for those who do not want to take drugs?

### **Light Therapy**

Sunlight on the eyes triggers production of serotonin and suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin. Light therapy works for many sufferers and this does not have to be special daylight bulbs but just very bright lights, about 5 times the normal levels found in the average office. You do not need to stare at them but just sit in front of them while you work as normal. The use of a daylight alarm clock, which wakes you up gradually, mimicking a natural dawn, before the alarm goes off, is very helpful to help reset the body clock and get you in the right frame of mind for the day<sup>1</sup>. OUTSIDE IN (on web) based at Dry Drayton sell a great selection of various daylight therapy products including a visor you can wear while getting ready in the morning. The key is powerful light for an hour or two in the mornings<sup>2</sup>. Also ensure your office lights are bright. However even better is natural light so get outside whenever you can (holidays abroad are even better but not always an option!), studies show that half an hour outside on a sunny winter day is more beneficial than two and a half hours in front of a light box<sup>3</sup>.

**Exercise** increases endorphins in the brain, more brain chemicals that improve mood but don't lock yourself in a gym. A 30-minute brisk walk outside would be more beneficial even on an overcast day. Try to do something outside 2-3 times a week, walking, gardening, cycling, playing sport or even watching.

Some trials into the use of **high density ionisers** has shown their use improved SAD symptoms in some sufferers both used with light therapy or on their own<sup>4</sup>.

**Diet** too can play a big part in how you feel and the cravings for sugary foods are a sure sign your serotonin levels are low. This happens because the sugar is quickly digested and causes a rapid rise in insulin to control sugar levels in the blood. Insulin also encourages the uptake of any proteins in the blood and one of these, tryptophan, is used to make serotonin. Therefore you get a surge of tryptophan leading to an increase in production of serotonin and you feel good-for a short while. However your sugary snack does not take long to digest, unlike a more substantial meal but the insulin released stays in your blood reducing sugar levels for some while, and your sugar levels plummet-another snack attack! Even before you reach for another biscuit this drop will have triggered the release of adrenalin, which encourages the release of stored sugar into the blood to compensate. Adrenalin is our stress hormone, it triggers our fight or flight response so we feel very agitated, anxious and our heart rate increases, more importantly for our mood it stops the production of serotonin. So we find ourselves in a vicious cycle of yo-yoing blood sugar levels, hormones and brain chemicals, not a healthy situation.

It will take effort to break this cycle but you will feel better once you do. Eating small meals containing complex carbohydrates and protein every 3 hours will stop the yo-yo effect as these foods take longer to digest so that the sugar is released slowly into the blood and levels remain even<sup>5</sup>. Avoid all over refined sugars and carbohydrates i.e. eat whole grain bread not white, fruitcake not jam doughnuts or dried fruit instead of sweets. Caffeine and alcohol both make the problem worse, and even in sugar free diet drinks there is a lot of caffeine which is a big downer. If you are drinking coffee or fizzy drinks 5-6 times a day you will probably be dehydrated (caffeine is a diuretic) and so feel tired and lethargic before your next caffeine fix, another yo-yo situation putting your body under strain. There are foods that are rich in tryptophan and eating these will give you a real boost (not an artificial one like the sugar and caffeine) as your body will be able to make more serotonin. Good examples include bananas, pumpkin seeds (all great for snacks), milk, nuts. Baked potatoes and the skins, chicken, turkey and cottage cheese. So try a banana smoothie with sunflower, pumpkin and sesame seeds added; a baked potato for lunch with cottage cheese/tuna or a chicken sandwich with whole grain bread.

You also need healthy brain cells for all the serotonin to work on and the thing they like best is Omega 3 essential oil found in oily fish, e.g. salmon, fresh tuna, tinned sardines, mackerel or cod. Hemp or flax oil are also good sources and, while you cannot cook with them, they are delicious used as salad dressings. Alternatively use a good quality supplement made by someone like Solgar, Quest or Lamberts. With all supplements you get what you pay for- cheap is a false economy.

Herbal medicine can bring relief to many sufferers and can be used in conjunction with light therapy, exercise and diet changes. The most popular is St John's Wort<sup>6, 7</sup>, which has been used for treating mild depression since the time of Hippocrates when, because of its yellow colour, was associated with the Sun. It works by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain. In Germany, where doctors routinely prescribe herbal medicines it is given as frequently as Prozac for the treatment of mild depression. However it must not be taken if you are already using certain types

of antidepressants nor if you are on many other types of medication. The reason is that another of its effects is to improve liver function (great for detox - see below) but this means drugs will be excreted more efficiently and if your health depends on a certain level of the drug in your body this could be detrimental. Examples include Warfarin, cancer or immunosuppressant drugs and even the contraceptive pill. So seek advice from an herbalist, as they are experienced in drug herb interactions. Other herbs that are beneficial for SAD include Lemon Balm, Damiana, Oats, Rosemary, Vervain and Passionflower and Siberian Ginseng. It really depends on your actual symptoms and an herbalist would make you a personalised mix of several herbs that will be best to help you.

You can try an uplifting tea (to replace all that coffee!). Half a teaspoon of cloves in a cup of boiling water, covered and left for 10 minutes to brew is great and can be sweetened with a little honey. Add cinnamon or ginger for a warming spicy blend. You can simmer one and half teaspoons of cloves for 30 minutes and add the mix to a bath. Essential oils can be a great way to improve your mood, the scents trigger positive chemical changes in the brain especially affecting mood, which is the reason why certain smells can evoke memories. You do not need a burner, just add a few drops on a tissue or add to a saucer of water and place on a radiator for the oils to evaporate or just sniff the tissue regularly. Uplifting oils to try are Basil, Bergamot, Orange, Palmarosa and Ylang Ylang. Use ones you personally like and change the oil you are using every few weeks as you become desensitised after a while. For example use Basil for two weeks then, Rosemary and then back to Basil again. Only buy oils that have the Latin botanical name as well as the common name on the bottle as this tells you it is unadulterated, good quality oil. Your local health food shop is a good place to try.

Try to have your own positive mantra. Repeating it can cut the circle of negative thoughts that SAD causes. A start to feeling better is deciding today what of the things suggested above you are going to do this week and also the week after.

## References

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**New Year New YOU**

Christmas will soon be here and over and then we all start feeling guilt about those extra pounds we've put on, the exercise we're not doing, the cigarettes we're still smoking and all those other vices we know we shouldn't! Yes its NEW YEAR RESOLUTION TIME AGAIN. And yes there are herbs to help with these too!

Your body stores toxins in body fat but when you diet these are realised and contribute you the feelings of lethargy, headaches and malaise associated with dieting. **When dieting protect your liver** as it has to the job of eliminating those toxins with Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianus*). St John's Wort (see warning above) improves liver efficiency. Other good liver herbs are Artichoke and Dandelion root. Beware any herbal mix that claims to increase weight loose they often contain laxative and diuretic herbs, not a healthy way to loose weight, and occasionally herbs that increase metabolism but have a detrimentally effect on blood pressure. If you really can't stop the **sugar cravings**, a few drops of Gymmena leaf (*Gymmena sylvestre*) blocks you sweet taste buds for a couple of hours so that biscuit will taste like cardboard.

Trying to **kick the evil weed**? Lobelia, only available from a qualified herbalist, can help. It makes you feel sick if you try to smoke. You will also need support coping with the withdrawal symptoms and herbs such as oats can be of benefit.

Before starting a **new exercise regime** it is a good idea to have your blood pressure checked and your general health and diet reviewed. Why not visit your herbalist for these (we are fully trained in health assessment) and to provide you with a safe herbal mix for your personal needs.