11 Herbal Anti-Inflammatory Remedies for Managing Chronic Pain

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Helpful Herbs for Pain

Medicinal treatments may help manage chronic pain, but they are not your only options. Herbs for pain are becoming increasingly popular for managing and treating pain without the side effects of pharmaceutical drugs.

Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine involves remedies and medicine made from plants to treat health problems. While most research on herbal remedies and medicines is new, there are many herbs that offer pain and inflammation reduction.

One report of out of the Journal of General Internal Medicine finds that at least 20% of people are using herbal medicine.

Here are some common herbal remedies you might consider for pain relief:

1. Capsaicin

Cayenne is an herb that has been used in food and medicine for thousands of years. The cayenne gets its hotness and spiciness from a substance called capsaicin.

For herbal use, cayenne peppers are ground up into a powder, which is mixed with other ground herbs in capsules or into a cream to create a topical pain reliever.

Studies find that capsaicin has pain relief qualities when applied to your skin. It reduces the amount of substance P, which is the chemical that carries messages to your brain that your body hurts.

2. Menthol

Menthol is an herbal substance made from peppermint oil and is generally found in creams, ointments and lotions. Rubbing a menthol-based pain relief cream instantly brings cooling and soothing relief to achy muscles.

Research shows that menthol-based analgesics (pain relievers that block signals in the brain) decrease pain and discomfort. They are also helpful in improving muscle contractions (due to inhabitation from pain) and function.

One study focused on 16 participants who either used a topic gel containing menthol or ice to their elbow flexors to reduce muscle soreness. After a couple of days, muscle soreness increased in those who did not receive the menthol cream. Those who used the menthol cream were showing better muscle function, at 116.9% higher, and their pain was also significantly less than those who used the ice.

3. Feverfew

Feverfew is a member of the daisy family and has been around for centuries to treat arthritis, headaches and even labor pains.

Feverfew is also known for its inflammation-reducing qualities. It may help you to manage inflammation and reduce pain from arthritis, gout, chronic pain and other inflammatory diseases effectively and with little or no side effects.

4. Skullcap

Chinese skullcap is a potent medicinal herb that has been used for over 2,000 years. It is available as an extract, tablet, or capsule and is believed to soothe pain of muscle spasms and tension headaches. It can also reduce inflammation.

You should check with your doctor before using skullcap because it has been known to interact with prescription medicine. It may be available through some of your favorite online retailers and local health food stores.

5. Willow Bark

Willow bark is an anti-inflammatory herb that is believed to work as well as NSAIDs. It naturally contains salicylic acid, the active compound in aspirin.

Studies show willow bark is effective in relieving headaches, low back pain, osteoarthritis pain, muscle cramps and tendonitis. A 2001 study of 78 people with osteoarthritis in the knee or hip showed that people who received willow bark had significantly less pain than those who took a placebo.

6. Boswellia

Boswellia, like willow bark, works as well as NSAIDs and may help with managing pain from injuries, osteoarthritis and forms of anti-inflammatory arthritis.

One study that compared the benefits of an NSAID against boswellia and another herbal remedy found that the herbal combination was superior to the NSAID for relieving pain and joint tenderness while giving one the ability to keep moving.

7. Ginger

Used in Chinese medicine for thousands of years, ginger is a natural anti-inflammatory associated with helping with arthritis pain, headaches and muscle soreness.

One study out of the University of Miami concluded ginger extract could be a substitute for NSAIDs for treating pain. The study of 247 patients with knee osteoarthritis found that ginger reduced pain and stiffness in knee joints by 40%, compared to the placebo.

8. Rosemary

Much like ginger, rosemary inhibits inflammation, but it is not as powerful. It also provides analgesic for relieving headache pain, muscle aches and even arthritis pain. However, there is not enough clinical evidence to confirm or rule out its effectiveness.

9. Devil's Claw Root

Devil’s claw is a natural analgesic and anti-inflammatory herb. There is some scientific evidence showing devil’s claw may be effective in managing back pain and arthritis.

In one random, double-blind study out of France, devil’s claw was taken over a period of four months by study

participants with knee and hip osteoarthritis. It was shown to be just as effective as NSAIDs and analgesic drugs. The participants who took the devil's claw experienced significantly lower side effects than the patients who took a prescription analgesic. The most-reported side effect with devil's claw was diarrhea.

10. Ginseng

In one fibromyalgia study, participants who took a daily ginseng supplement reported a 31.7% reduction in pain by the sixth week. By the twelfth week, study subjects reported a 39.4% pain reduction.

Pain reduction in the ginseng subjects was similar to the study participants taking the prescription medication amitriptyline. In addition to managing pain, ginseng may also help you to manage fatigue, sleep and mood. It causes side effects, including anxiety, nervousness, diarrhea and headaches, and it may interact with your other medicine, so check with your doctor before using it.

11. Valerian Root

There has been some research indicating that valerian root may help with muscle pain, cramps and spasms. Valerian root works through the nervous system as a natural analgesic.

In one study reported in The Indian Journal of Experimental Biology, researchers found that valerian root created a significant analgesic effect in animal models, and the essential oils of the valerian root increased the helpfulness of aspirin.

Some Things to Remember

Anti-inflammatory herbal remedies can help you to manage pain naturally, without the side effects of prescription medications. Used alone, or in combination with physical activity and stress relief measures (i.e. meditation or relaxation breathing), these herbs can help to significantly reduce pain.

Just remember to be cautious with herbal remedies, as some of those may not help or have unwanted side effects, may interact with other medicines, or you may be allergic to some ingredients. Always check with your healthcare provider or a licensed alternative medicine practitioner before starting any herbal medication.