

Herbal Actions ~ The Language of Botanical Medicine

Adaptogen is a term coined from the hypothalamic-pituitary balancing effects of ginseng. It is now used to describe many herbs that “help the brain adapt to stress.”

Alterative herbs gently restore balance to the body.

Analgesic agents help to alleviate pain and may be used internally or topically.

Anthelmintic herbs aid in the destruction and expulsion of intestinal worms (vermifuge).

Anti-bacterial agents that have specific action against pathogenic bacteria.

Anti-catarrhal herbs aid in removing excess catarrh or mucus from the respiratory tract. They may work by drying up mucus and opening respiratory passages.

Anti-emetics help to reduce nausea and may inhibit vomiting from digestive upset or pregnancy.

Anti-fungal herbs destroy or inhibit the growth of fungus including topical fungal infections, vaginal yeast infections and internal candida overgrowth.

Anti-inflammatory mediate inflammation through inhibiting prostaglandins, stabilizing mast cells, mimicking anti-inflammatory steroids in the body and other mechanisms.

Anti-lithics prevent or reduce the size of calculi or stones in the urinary tract. They may also help the body in removal of stones due to anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic and diuretic actions.

Anti-microbial agents destroy or help the body resist microbes. They are generally broad spectrum and may combat bacteria, viruses, fungi and protozoa.

Antioxidants help to bind to highly reactive unpaired electrons called free radicals. When in excess, free radicals can wreak havoc on tissue.

Anti-spasmodic herbs ease or negate muscular spasms. Herbs often have affinities for different areas of the body. Where cramp bark helps combat uterine and intestinal spasms, lobelia aids in calming bronchial spasms associated with asthma.

Anti-tussive is Greek for “against cough.” Herbs with this property calm or inhibit the cough reflex and should be considered when there is excessive coughing that is dry and irritating.

Anti-virals may work specifically to destroy a virus or they may slow or impair the spread of viruses in the body.

Astringents are herbs that tighten tissue and decrease tissue secretions. They may contain tannins, which bind to proteins and form a protective layer on the skin or tissue.

Bitter herbs stimulate the secretion of digestive fluids through a reflux in the taste buds. They enhance digestion through stimulating gastric juice, bile and pancreatic enzymes.

Carminative herbs help to reduce gas in the digestive tract due to their high presence of volatile oils that may relax the stomach and aid in peristalsis (the rhythmic contraction of the intestines).

Cholagogues stimulate the secretion of bile from the gall bladder and therefore ease digestion. They are often employed to ease constipation.

Demulcent herbs contain mucilage, a slimy substance that protects and soothes irritated tissue.

Diaphoretics increase perspiration and aid the body in removing toxins through the skin. They reduce fever by allowing the body to sweat and cooling the surface temperature of the skin.

Diuretics stimulate and increase secretion of urine from the kidneys by a variety of mechanisms including high potassium and mineral content.

Emetic herbs induce vomiting and usually need to be taken at a sizable dose. Smaller doses of these herbs may have tonic effects including expectoration.

Emmenagogues stimulate and sometimes normalize the flow of menstruation.

Expectorant herbs help expel respiratory mucus. Stimulating expectorants aid respiratory cells in removing mucus and relaxing expectorants may have mucilage or volatile oils and are gentler.

Febrifuges reduce fever through increasing perspiration or through inhibiting prostaglandin production in a similar way to aspirin.

Galactagogue herbs increase the flow of breast milk.

Hepatics are tonic to the liver and may increase the flow of bile.

Haemostatic herbs help to stop or slow down internal and external bleeding.

Hypotensive agents lower blood pressure through a variety of mechanisms. They may be diuretic, relax smooth muscles, decrease vascular resistance or may be beta-2 agonists.

Immunostimulant is a broad term that denotes enhancement of immune function.

Laxative herbs aid excretion from the bowel. Bulk laxatives have bulking agents that aid in intestinal motility and tonicity while stimulating laxatives may directly stimulate peristalsis.

Nervines may calm, tone and strengthen the nervous system.

Rubefacient herbs are used on the skin to stimulate blood supply and tissue function.

Sedatives calm the nervous system and may aid in anxiety and stress.

Stimulants are used to stimulate the nervous system, often through aiding in the release or utilization of sympathetic hormones from the adrenal glands.

Tonic herbs have a revitalizing and nourishing effect on the body.

Vulnerary herbs are applied topically to soothe wounds and increase healing.