

# HERBAL HEALTHWATCH

## A NEW TREATMENT FOR UTI: GREEN TEA

Cranberry preparations are the go-to herbal approach for prevention and treatment of urinary tract infections (UTIs). But recently, Iranian researchers demonstrated that another herb also helps: green tea (*Camellia sinensis*). It has well-documented antibacterial action, and this includes targeting the usual cause of UTI, *E. coli*.

The researchers recruited 70 women, ages 18 to 50, who had confirmed cases of UTIs and treated them with standard pharmaceuticals. They also gave half the women a placebo, while the other half received identical looking capsules containing green tea (500 mg/day).

Three days later, the green tea group showed significantly faster and greater improvement.

This study, published in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, needs confirmation from other research before it can be considered valid. But green tea is safe, delicious, and has been shown to offer many health benefits, for example reduced risk of many cancers and cardiovascular disease. Women who develop UTIs might consider combining standard treatment with a few daily cups of green tea.

## CRANBERRY HELPS RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Speaking of cranberries, a recent study shows that the red fruits do more than prevent and treat UTIs. They also help control rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

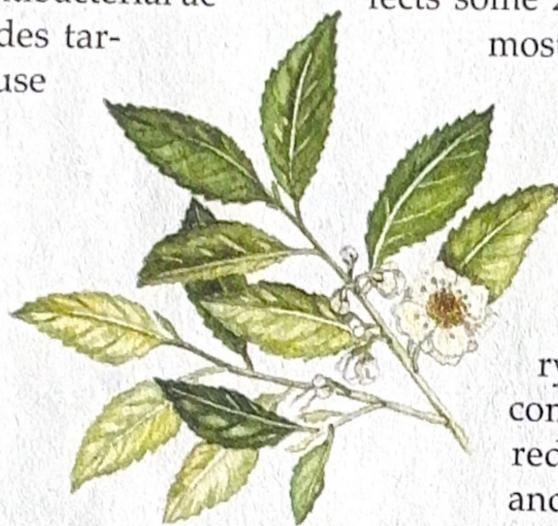
RA is the second most common form of joint pain and inflammation (after osteoarthritis), but much more debilitating. It causes joint deformity (misshapen joints) and sometimes crippling loss of joint function. Over the long haul, it also increases risk for cardiovascular disease, the nation's leading cause of death. RA affects some 2 million Americans, most of them women.

Like all brightly colored fruits, cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) are high in anti-inflammatory and antioxidant compounds that help reduce inflammation and risk for cardiovascular disease—effects that suggested possible use against RA. Seeing this potential, Brazilian

researchers tested cranberry juice as a way to help control RA.

They gave 41 women with RA either no treatment or cranberry juice (500 ml/day, about a pint) and told them to maintain their customary diets and exercise regimens.

After 90 days, the cranberry group showed decreases in swollen joints and other markers of RA ( $p=0.05$ ). The results, published in *Nutrition*, were statistically significant, but just barely, so cranberry doesn't look like a miracle treatment. Nonetheless, cranberry juice and the berries themselves are safe, easily available, and affordable, and public health officials urge Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables, especially those that are brightly colored like cranberry. If you have RA, cranberry products can't hurt—and just might help.



green tea

## BLUEBERRIES MAY HELP MAKE KIDS SMARTER

Over the past few decades, blueberries (*Vaccinium angustifolium*), a close botanical relative of cranberry, have garnered a great deal of media attention as a "superfood." Blueberries are very high in antioxidant nutrients that, among many other benefits, have demonstrated that they improve blood flow through the brain. English researchers recently found that even a single serving of blueberries improves the mental acuity of seven- to 10-year-old schoolchildren.

Researchers at the University of Reading, UK, gave 54 children ages seven to 10 a battery of reading comprehension tests to establish their baseline performance. Then half the children consumed a blue-colored placebo beverage, while the other half drank blueberry juice containing the equivalent of 1.5 cups of fresh berries. Two hours later, all of the kids participated in another round of reading comprehension tests.

The children who consumed the real blueberry juice performed better, with significantly faster reaction times, better recall, and greater attention to assigned tasks. The blueberry treatment did not turn the kids into geniuses but did improve their mental agility.

Previous research shows that long-term ingestion of blueberries improves cognitive function in people of all ages. This recent report in *European Journal of Nutrition* extends these findings by showing that even a single dose of blueberries improves learning and mental acuity. Is the same true for adults? The study did not address this, so we don't know. But I don't think it's much of a stretch to believe that adding blueberries to one's diet helps cognitive function at any age.

## LAVENDER AROMATHERAPY & MOOD

A few decades ago, many scientists scoffed at the notion that inhaling essential plant oils or adding them to massage lotions could make any difference to mood or health. But since then, many studies have shown that the molecules of a variety of fragrant plant oils pass quickly into the bloodstream and have an array of physiological effects, particularly improvement of mood and treatment of anxiety. The primary agent of aromatherapy is lavender oil (*Lavandula* spp.), and two recent studies show that it helps relieve depression in older adults.

Iranian researchers tested lavender aromatherapy on women experiencing menopause. Around 80 percent of women report annoying and sometimes debilitating symptoms during menopause, including irritability, depression, and anxiety.

The investigators surveyed the discomforts of 62 menopausal women, average age of 55, and then gave

them a vial of either distilled water or an identical looking vial of lavender oil. The women were instructed to place two drops of their vial contents on a bandana and wear it around their necks every evening for 20 minutes before retiring for the night.

Both treatments significantly relieved hot flashes, which often occurs with placebos. But only the women in the lavender group reported improvement of mood and reduction of anxiety. The researchers published their findings in *Complementary Care in Clinical Practice*.

Meanwhile, Chinese scientists recruited 60 elderly individuals who had mild to moderate depression. They were assigned to one of three interventions: a wait list, massage with a lotion containing lavender oil and other essential oils—sweet orange (*Citrus sinensis*), bergamot (*Citrus bergamia*), and sweet almond (*Prunus dulcis*)—or no massage but nasal inhalation of the four essential oils. The massage group received half-hour

massages twice a week. The inhalation group breathed the plant oils for 30 minutes twice a week.

After 10 weeks, only 5 percent of those on the wait list reported any improvement in depression. But in the inhalation group, 40 percent reported mood elevation; in the massage group, 55 percent. Findings were published in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*.

Lavender and other essential oils are easy to use—simply open their containers and inhale. However, keep essential oils away from children. Ingestion of as little as a teaspoon can be fatal.

Severe depression requires professional care. But for everyday blues and the mood disturbances of menopause, evidence shows that lavender aromatherapy helps. 🌿

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## BOSWELLIA FOR IBS

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), also known as irritable colon, spastic colon, and functional bowel disorder, is very common, affecting an estimated 20 percent of Americans. But it's not really a disease; it's an assortment of persistent, uncomfortable, often stress-related gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms, including abdominal cramps, bloating, frequent flatulence, diarrhea or constipation, and possibly heartburn and queasiness. IBS sufferers have "nervous stomachs" and feel their GI tracts are out of control, which is unpleasant, and for many, unnerving. Small pilot studies have suggested that boswellia (*Boswellia serrata*) might help, and now a larger, longer-term trial published in *Minerva Gastroenterologica e Dietologica* shows that, indeed, it does.

Italian researchers recommended standard diet and lifestyle changes to 69 chronic IBS sufferers: lower-fat diet, less sugar, more fruits and vegetables, relaxed eating, smaller meals, and daily exercise and stress management. Half also took drugs prescribed to treat IBS, while half took boswellia (250 mg/day).

After six months, the boswellia group reported significantly fewer, milder IBS symptoms and required fewer visits to the doctor for additional treatment.

Boswellia is an aromatic resin extruded from the bark of tropical boswellia trees that grow from North Africa to India. For centuries, the resin has been used in Ayurvedic medicine to treat a variety of health problems, including arthritis, dysentery, and digestive upsets. It contains anti-inflammatory compounds (boswellic acids) that have been shown to be beneficial in treating ulcerative colitis.

IBS often causes a vicious cycle—the symptoms can be madden-

ing, which increases the individual's stress level, and that in turn aggravates symptoms. Diet and lifestyle changes don't reliably help, nor do a variety of drugs.

Boswellia is generally considered safe. Those with IBS might try it. However, some sources suggest that boswellia may stimulate menstruation, so women who are pregnant or may become pregnant should avoid it.

Boswellia is available at most natural food stores and online.

## GREEN TEA FOR UTIs

At some point in life, around half of women develop the urinary urgency and pain of a urinary tract infection (UTI, bladder infection, cystitis). The cause is intestinal bacteria, usually *E. coli*, that migrate from the anal area into the urine tube (urethra) and infect the bladder. Doctors treat UTIs with antibiotics, which usually work. But recently, a study in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* showed that one combination therapy works better: antibiotics plus green tea (*Camellia sinensis*).

The researchers gave 70 UTI sufferers, ages 18 to 50, either standard antibiotics plus a placebo or the drugs plus green tea (500 mg) once a day for three days. The result? The women taking the green tea showed significantly faster improvement, and they were also less likely to suffer recurrences within six months.

Green tea contains compounds called catechins that have well documented antibacterial effects against *E. coli*. But oddly, this is the first clinical trial to test green tea as a UTI remedy.

The study was rigorous—double-blind with a placebo arm—but small, so it's difficult to infer validity from a single trial involving just 70 women. However, green tea is safe, affordable, widely available, and



green tea

confers many other health benefits, notably reduced risk of heart disease and many cancers. If you develop a UTI, there's no harm in supplementing prescribed antibiotics with several daily cups of green tea.

## PUMPKIN SEEDS FOR BPH

Medically known as benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH), prostate enlargement is the urinary bane of older men. During middle age, the prostate, a walnut-sized organ that sits above the male rectum, begins to grow larger. Its growth pinches the urethra, causing several urinary problems: urgency (needing to go immediately), hesitancy (trouble getting started), trouble finishing, weak stream (poor to very poor flow), and nocturia (having to get up at night to urinate, possibly several times). Doctors prescribe pharmaceuticals to slow prostate growth and relieve BPH symptoms. In cases involving very weak stream and multiple nightly wake-ups, surgeons can snip away overgrown prostate tissue, which opens the urethra and restores strong urine flow.

Several herbs have been shown to help prevent and treat BPH, including saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), which shrinks overgrown prostate tissue almost as well as pharmaceuticals, and African star grass (*Hypoxis rooperi*). Pumpkin seeds (*Cucurbita pepo styriaca*) also show promise, and a recent study published in the *Journal of Medicinal Foods* has found even more evidence that supports their use.

German researchers surveyed the BPH symptoms of 58 men, ages

60 to 75, who had reported symptoms for at least six months. The men were instructed to ingest pumpkin seed extract (500 mg/day).

After four weeks, most participants showed significant reductions of BPH symptoms, with continued improvements over the 12-week study: fewer wake-ups, with severe symptoms decreasing to moderate, and moderate symptoms reverting to mild.

The dose used in this study isn't very much. Look for an extract if you wish, or simply eat more pumpkin seeds. Lightly toasted, they add a delicious, nutty flavor to salads, breads, vegetable dishes, and fruit salads.

### YARROW FOR EARLY MS

**M**ultiple sclerosis (MS) is an unpredictable and fairly common disease, affecting roughly 1 million Americans. In some people, MS remains mild and never causes debilitating symptoms. Others experience intermittent pain, fatigue, vision difficulties, and mobility issues in their limbs. And

some experience unrelenting problems that can include paralysis. For reasons unknown, MS is twice as common in women as men. There is no cure for MS, but pharmaceuticals may help slow and limit progression. A recent study shows that yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) may also delay progression.

Iranian researchers recruited 65 MS sufferers, ages 18 to 55, who had mild to moderate symptoms and had experienced one or more relapses during the previous two years. Study participants were told to continue their medications, and in addition the researchers gave them either a placebo or yarrow (250 or 500 mg/day). At three-month intervals for a year, they were assessed using several standard scales of MS symptoms and progression.

Compared with the placebo group, those who took either dose of yarrow showed significantly reduced relapse frequency. There was no difference between the effects of the low and high yarrow doses. The yarrow groups also showed less disability

and likelihood of MS progression.

Yarrow contains several compounds that may support its potential use for MS. Achilletin and achilleine spur blood coagulation, and azulene, camphor, chamazulene, eugenol, menthol, quercetin, rutin, and salicylic acid all have anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving action. Yarrow also contains apigenin and luteolin, which have helped minimize neurological injuries in animal studies.

This study, published in *Phyto-medicine*, had a small number of participants, so it can't be considered definitive. But it was reasonably rigorous, which lends credence to its findings. Yarrow is safe, but large doses may discolor urine.

The jury is still out about yarrow for MS, but hopefully this prompts further research. 🌿

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Michael Castleman, author of *The New Healing Herbs* (fourth edition) has covered herbal medicine for *Herb Quarterly* since 1988—32 years.