

Holistic Support for Asthma
Ohlone Center for Herbal Studies
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Cole Lea

Introduction

There are increasing rates of asthma in America. More and more people are looking to holistic treatments to help minimize asthma symptoms and to mitigate the unwanted effects of pharmaceuticals prescribed for the condition. Herbs, nutritional support, lifestyle changes and flower essences can help treat, control and even reverse asthma symptoms. These therapies are most effective when used as preventative tonics and for symptom control in the early stages of asthma attacks. Herbal therapy does not replace allopathic support, like rescue inhalers, for severe asthma attacks.

Are asthmatics canaries in the coal-mine? I wondered this after being diagnosed with asthma myself in my teenage years and reading about and noticing the higher than normal rates of asthma in the area I was raised. A common way that doctors and medical texts describe asthma is to say people have bronchial passages that are more sensitive than normal to allergens, irritation, and pollution. Perhaps more and more people are developing asthma because there is more and more pollution and chemicals in our environment.

According to the Centers for Disease control and Prevention (CDC) 24.6 million Americans are diagnosed with asthma. That is roughly 8 percent. Between 2001 and 2009 there has been a 12 percent hike in asthma in America. This increase hit black children especially hard with an almost 50 percent hike in that eight year period and as of 2009 a full 17 percent of black children suffered from asthma, the largest amount of any group.

Asthma is often well controlled by allopathic medications. Unfortunately the per-person cost for treating asthma averages about \$3,300 per year and many people are forced to go without care because of economic reasons.

Insurance coverage also has a huge impact: 2 in every 5 uninsured people with asthma are unable to afford medication to treat their condition, compared to 1 in every 9 people with insurance. Lack of insurance and access to asthma medications is a huge factor in asthma hospitalizations and deaths. Since 1980 the death rate for asthma has increased 50 percent with the childhood death rate increasing 80 percent!

Every day in America:

- 40,000 people miss school or work due to asthma.
- 30,000 people have an asthma attack.
- 5,000 people visit the emergency room due to asthma.
- 1,000 people are admitted to the hospital due to asthma.
- 11 people die from asthma.

Mortality Rates:

- There are more than 4,000 deaths due to asthma each year, many of which are avoidable with proper treatment and care. In addition, asthma is indicated as “contributing factor” for nearly 7,000 other deaths each year.
- More females die of asthma than males, and women account for nearly 65% of asthma deaths overall.
- African Americans are three times more likely to die from asthma.

- African American Women have the highest asthma mortality rate of all groups, more than 2.5 times higher than Caucasian women.

Asthma Triggers and Symptoms

Many people with asthma can reduce the occurrence of asthma symptoms by avoiding triggers. Unfortunately there are sometimes triggers that are more difficult to avoid which is one reason children with asthma, people living in polluted areas, and people who do work with chemicals are more likely to have fatal asthma attacks.

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory condition. It is a lung disorder in which the airways are more sensitive than typical, and can become seriously inflamed making breathing very difficult. There is often inflammation in the bronchial tubes, constriction of muscles surrounding the bronchial tubes, and the production of mucus or sputum. The sensitivity of the airways leads to inflammation deep in the lungs. In response to the inflammation there is a production of mucus and a tightening of the muscles surrounding the bronchial tubes. All of these things together cause narrower tighter airways and the symptoms of asthma.

Asthma is characterized by the following symptoms:

- Wheezing on expiration, a tickle in the airway
- Tightness of chest, sometimes painful
- Coughing, usually dry coughing
- Production of mucous clogging the airway
- Shortness of breath, often described as not being able to get a deep enough breath or a feeling of breathing through a straw
- Broncho-constriction and swelling of the bronchial tubes

Asthma Triggers

There are many, many different triggers for asthma attacks. An asthma attack can be described as the symptoms of asthma responding to a trigger. Many asthma triggers are very different for different people. For example weather changes can cause an extreme flare up of asthma symptoms in one person with asthma and have absolutely no effect on someone else.

Since it is so different for everyone one of the most important things in helping someone with asthma can be figuring out what triggers they have and in what ways asthma symptoms manifest for them. Another thing that can be particularly helpful aside from avoiding triggers is identifying and listening to warning signs. Often times there is a tickle in your throat or a slight tightness in the chest that, if caught early and treated, can be prevented from developing into a full blown asthma attack. Some of the treatments, allopathic or herbal, will not work for everyone with asthma. Some treatments will work depending on the symptom or the trigger. All of these things are important to keep in mind when developing a treatment plan.

Allergies are one of the main triggers for asthma. In childhood asthma it is estimated 75% is related to allergies. Below are some seemingly unrelated symptoms people have that can be a signal of allergic asthma.

Allergic symptoms that can indicate allergic symptoms:

Migraines
Hay fever
Eczema
Hives

Other triggers of asthma symptoms:

- Ingested allergens such as food, drugs, food additives, yeasts or molds. Some common food triggers are dairy, eggs, soy, wheat, red wine, dried fruit, shellfish, and food additive monosodium glutamate (msg).
- Airborne pollutants like dust, wood smoke, mold, chemicals, perfume.
- Heartburn. As much as 30 percent of all asthma may be caused by gastric reflux.
- Exercise and Weather Changes. Cold and dry is more irritating to asthma than warm and moist.
- Emotional or Physical Stress.
- Colds and Respiratory Infections.

Once a person is exposed to one of their triggers, the airways can become more and more sensitive to other triggers. They can even become sensitive to things that didn't bother them before.

Allopathic Treatment of Asthma

The two most common types of pharmaceuticals prescribed for asthma are steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and bronchodilators. Bronchodilators are drugs used for short-term emergency situations and anti-inflammatory drugs are prescribed for both short and long-term management of symptoms and to prevent asthma attacks in the future. Not every person that has asthma takes a long-term anti-inflammatory drug but if they are using their inhaler more often than their doctor likes they will be prescribed one.

Bronchodilators are usually what you think of when you imagine an asthma inhaler. They are also called rescue inhalers and they relieve the symptoms of asthma by relaxing the muscles that tighten around the airways. This will let more and more air come in the lungs and helps clear mucus from the lungs by opening the airways. Bronchodilators are what people use when they are having an asthma attack. Common types of bronchodilators are Proventil (albuterol) and Xopenex (levabuterol).

Anti-inflammatory drugs are given in serious acute situations orally. Oral corticosteroids like Deltasone and Metacorten (prednisone) are prescribed for 2 or 3 day periods. Inhaled anti-inflammatory corticosteroids drugs are prescribed to take daily and sometimes they are packaged in a typical inhaler like Flovent (fluticasone), sometimes they are packaged in a diskus with inhaled powder like Advair (fluticasone and salmeterol). These inhaled corticosteroids prevent asthma attacks from happening in the first place by reducing inflammation and sensitivity in the airways on an ongoing basis. They cannot be used in asthma attacks and they are not rescue inhalers. Finally many people who have allergy related asthma are prescribed allergy medication in addition to their long-term corticosteroid. Long-

term asthma symptom prevention and allergy control are two areas where holistic treatments really shine!

Common Unwanted Effects of Pharmaceuticals

Proventil, Accuneb (Albuterol)

- nervousness
- dizziness
- headache
- nausea
- sinus inflammation
- sore or dry throat
- tremor
- trouble sleeping
- vomiting.
- sinus inflammation
- unusual taste in mouth

Xopenex (levabuterol)

- dizziness
- tremor or nervousness
- anxiety
- headache
- cough or runny nose
- upset stomach
- leg cramps

Deltasone or Metacorten (prednisone)

- difficulty sleeping
- nervousness
- feeling of a whirling motion
- increased appetite
- increased sweating
- indigestion
- mood changes

Flovent (fluticasone)

- dry mouth
- flu
- headache
- hoarseness
- nasal discharge

- runny nose
- sinus swelling
- sore throat
- stuffy nose
- upper respiratory tract infection.

Advair (fluticasone and salmetrol)

- upper respiratory tract infections
- headaches
- sore throat
- bronchitis
- coughing
- nausea and vomiting
- sinus infections
- hoarseness or voice changes
- muscle pain or bone pain
- fever
- menstrual problems
- thrush
- abdominal pain
- diarrhea
- dizziness
- bloody nose

Many of the drugs prescribed for asthma are steroids or corticosteroids and they have similar unwanted effects like nervousness, anxiety, insomnia, and respiratory infections. These unwanted effects are often minimized with the use of calming nervines and long term use of adaptogens. It is a good idea to make sure the person you are working with is not allergic to plants in the Asteraceae family as these plants could potentially trigger asthma symptoms.

Holistic Treatments for Asthma

Lifestyle changes for people dealing with asthma symptoms are the obvious first step and they can often cause dramatic improvement. Once asthma triggers have been identified they can be eliminated as much as possible. Pet dander, cigarette smoke, dust, mold, and food allergies; all of these things can be controlled and avoided to a certain extent. If someone is unsure about what is causing the allergy an elimination diet can be used. In an elimination diet a person stops eating sugar, dairy, gluten, eggs, soy, food and beverages with sulphates, alcohol, chocolate, and then reintroduces the foods one at a time being careful to notice any sensitivity or asthma symptoms. This can also be used for products like soap, cleansers, and laundry detergent. People are commonly very reactive to the dyes and fragrances used in commercial cleaning products and personal care products, so eliminating their use for several weeks and only using water diluted castille soap is similar to the elimination diet. Then you watch for reactions when reintroducing the products. Many with asthma symptoms are so sensitive to chemical fragrances they will choose to make their own cleaning and personal care products and this is a great idea!

Stress reduction is another important factor that can make a huge difference. The benefits of herbal adaptogens and nervines are invaluable here. I like to think of adaptogens with an affinity for the respiratory system like Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*), or Holy Basil/Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*).

If there are triggers we cannot exactly eliminate completely like pollution, weather or seasonal allergies, we can herbally support the client in a way tailored to that trigger. For example Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is an excellent treatment for allergy related asthma. Folks who have indoor allergies sometimes are able to minimize symptoms by purchasing and air filter. I have found it helpful to wear a scarf to breathe through if I am unwittingly exposed to diesel emissions or perfume. People with weather sensitive or pollution sensitive asthma that are living in a climate that gets extremely hot or dry in summers often need an air conditioner. When it gets cold and that is an asthma trigger breathing through a scarf and drinking warm liquids can be helpful.

Actions Indicated in Herbal Treatment of Asthma:

Anti-inflammatory herbs to bring down the swelling of the airways like Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) or Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*).

Herbs with bronchodilating and antispasmodic effects including; Ma Huang (*Ephedra sinica*), Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*), Wild Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and Gumweed (*Grindelia camporum*)

Expectorants to help prevent mucus buildup in the lungs. Note that many herbalists advise against using stimulant expectorants as they can irritate things further but I think it depends on the client and the trigger. I have personally had great results using stimulating expectorants. Some examples of relaxing expectorants are Lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*), Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), and Gumweed (*Grindelia camporum*). Two plants that could be classified as stimulating expectorants that I find to be indispensable are Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) and Elecampagne (*Inula helenium*).

Demulcents to support the expectoration and soothe irritation. Great herbs for this are Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), and Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) as they have an affinity for the respiratory system. However Marshmallow (*Althea officinalis*) or any other Mallow (*Althea spp.*) would also work.

Cardiotonics to support strain and lung congestion. My favorites are Hawthorne (*Crataegus spp.*) and Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*). Both of these are great choices because they are also relaxing nervines.

Antimicrobials are really important if there is a respiratory infection or the possibility of a respiratory infection. Aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*) and Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) are specific to the respiratory tract.

Relaxing nervines and adaptogen herbs are great as a preventative if symptoms are triggered by stress. If stress is not a symptom trigger, asthma symptoms and medications can

cause stress, insomnia, and anxiety as well. An asthma specific nervine like Lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*) will work, however since Lobelia is a low-dosage herb I prefer to mix it with other nervines like Skullcap (*Scutellaria latiflora*), Chamomile (*Matricaria recnita*), Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*), Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), or Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*). Several adaptogens particularly useful here are Holy Basil/Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*), Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) and Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*) because they are specific to the respiratory system. Others that can be helpful to include are Ashwaganda (*Withania somniferum*) for its nervine qualities helpful to those with insomnia, or Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) which is an anti-inflammatory.

Alteratives are always good herbal allies. They will support our bodies in processing pharmaceutical drugs and are specially helpful for folks who have allergy or pollution related asthma. Alteratives can help open up the routes of elimination in the body and often help our bodies process waste and toxins. Most also have the added benefit of vitamins and minerals as well. Red Clover (*Trifolium pretense*) is my number one alterative choice because it has a respiratory affinity. It can help clear mucus from the lungs and you will breathe deeper. Stinging Nettles (*Urtica dioica*) is a respiratory strengthener. Beloved to those of us with allergic asthma, nettle is perfect for bringing up respiratory congestion without irritating inflamed mucosa. Nettle can be juiced, made into a tea, or tinctured for use as a restorative tonic. Nettles is combined with Eyebright (*Euphrasia*), and Mullein (*Verbascum thapus*) for a tea used to combat hayfever triggered asthma. If corticosteroids are making you anxious, nervous, jittery, or spacey, Burdock (*Articum lappa*) or Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) can help ground you as well as support the elimination of toxins.

Tinctures for Asthma Symptoms

Tinctures are great because they are portable and they keep forever. They are also an economical use of herbs that are scarce. They can help us use herbs on a regular basis that we don't have access to year round. They can be used daily as a preventative or when symptoms present themselves. Keep in mind not every herb will work for every asthmatic or every symptom so it is good to try several. These can be used individually (also called "simple") or in combination.

- Mullein (*Verbascum thapus*)
- Elecampagne (*Inula belenium*)
- Gumweed (*Grindelia camphorum*)
- Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)
- Lobelia (*Lobelia inflata*)
- Red Clover (*Trifolium pretense*)
- Wild Cherry Bark (*Prunella serotina*)
- Holy Basil/ Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*)

Combination Tincture Formula

1pt. Mullein
1pt. Nettle
1pt. Holy Basil/Tulsi
3/4pt. Motherwort

1/4pt. Lobelia

This combination tincture can be taken in a 30ml dose 2-3 X daily.

Herbal Tea Blends for Asthma Symptom Prevention

These tea blends are great for long-term maintenance as well as coping with mild asthma symptoms. They can be used before resorting to a rescue inhaler, or in conjunction with a rescue inhaler. To make a tea from these blends you take one tablespoon of tea blend per cup of boiling water and steep covered for 10-15 minutes. Honey is a soothing addition. Another way to take these herbs for long-term support is by infusion. An infusion is made by putting a handful (or roughly one ounce) of dried herb in a glass quart jar and filling it up with boiling water. Cover the jar and leave it to sit 4-8 hours. Overnight is perfect. You may want to include a wooden spoon in jar to prevent the glass from cracking. This has never happened to me but I have heard stories! If you do not have a quart jar you can leave the boiling water in the pot with the herbs to steep. Cover the pot. You will need four cups of water to equal a quart. Infusions are strong tasting medicinal strength teas. They can be taken with honey, hot or cold. You can also make the rock stars of these blends into simple infusions. A simple is when you use just one herb. Nettle, Mullein, Red Clover and Holy Basil make delicious simples for asthma maintenance.

Allergy and Asthma Free Tea

1pt. Eyebright (*Euphrasia*)
2pt. Mullien (*Verbascum thapsus*)
3pt. Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

Breathe Calm and Deep

3 pt. Holy Basil/Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*)
3 pt. Red Clover (*Trifolium pretense*)
1 pt. Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*)
1pt. Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*)
1pt. Burdock (*Articum lappa*)

Tasty Lung Strengthening Tea

3pt. Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)
2pt. Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)
1pt. Holy Basil/Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*)
½ pt. Peppermint (*Mentha piperata*)

Essential oils and Aromatherapy for Asthma

Essential oils can be very soothing and helpful for people with asthma symptoms. I encourage folks to experiment with the scents and actions essential oils have on them BEFORE they are having an asthma attack. Since having an asthma attack can make one

much more sensitive to strong smells this is no time to experiment with new scents in my opinion. Two of the most effective ways to use essential oils for asthma symptoms are as rubs (in oil or salve, think vaporub!) or inhaled from the bottle or a piece of cloth. One can also put a few drops in the shower while bathing or in a diffuser if you have one. Essential oils to use will be ones that help you breathe deeply, and essential oils that are calming/relaxing to the nervous system.

Essential Oils to Use for Deep Breathing

- Peppermint
- Holy Basil
- Aniseed
- Hyssop
- Thyme (specifically effective for kids is *Thymus vulgaris linololiferum*)
- Rosemary
- Tea Tree (be conservative and test beforehand as tea tree can irritate some people)
- Eucalyptus

Essential Oils to Calm and Relax

- Roman Chamomile
- Lavender
- Geranium

Inhalation Recipe (safe for children 5 and over)

8 drops of tea tree oil

7 drops of chamomile

OR

10 drops of lavender

10 drops of thyme

10 drops of peppermint

Mix into a combo blend and use 3 drops at a time in shower, diffuser or on a piece of cloth.

Oil/ Rub recipe

2 TBS of light neutral oil like grapeseed or almond oil

10 drops of lavender or geranium

10 drops of eucalyptus or tea tree oil

Rub on back. I like to add my favorite flower and gemstone essences to this.

Flower and Gemstone Essences for Asthma Symptoms

Flower essences are especially comforting during or immediately following the panic of an asthma attack. In particular Rescue Remedy (Bach's Five Flower blend), and Star of Bethlehem are good for acute emergency situations. Comfrey and Wild Rose can be helpful if asthma attacks are stress or trauma related. Opal gemstone essence can help with over taxed adrenals and it is good to take after a course of prednisone. Lapis lazuli, Aquamarine,

and Blue Tourmaline are all gemstone essences that are specific to the lungs and worth getting to know. These essences can be taken individually or added to tinctures, rubs and cups of tea.

The Value of Emotional Healing

Emotionally asthma has been associated with someone who has not been allowed to express their feelings and emotions. Someone who has a secret they were not allowed to tell. Someone who hasn't been able to cry or yell or express their emotions in the way that they wanted or needed to. Talk therapy can really help someone who identifies with this description.

Conclusion

The value of holistic treatments for asthma symptoms cannot be overstated. Economically herbs are much cheaper and accessible to low income individuals and the millions of Americans without access to affordable health insurance. Many of these plants grow as weeds in our communities or are easily cultivated. The ability to manage symptoms and mitigate the effects of pharmaceuticals with herbs and other natural therapies improves the quality of life.

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