

Are There Herbal Remedies for Neck Pain?

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This question from B.O. in Hampton Bays: I had a compression fracture in my neck years ago, and I still have pain and discomfort. One of the doctors I've seen recommended that I take ginger root, to reduce inflammation. I haven't noticed a difference. Are there other herbal remedies that may be of help?

Short of opium from the poppy plant, not really.

There are many good herbal anti-inflammatories; willow, boswellia, bromelain, tumeric, ginger to name but a few; however, they, like their anti-inflammatory drug counterparts, work best on inflammation from a functional cause. If it ends in "itis" like arthritis, diverticulitis, tendonitis, etc., the herbals will probably help. However, if the pain is from a structural cause like a compression fracture, they will be of very little help.

Acupuncture can work wonders to block pain, I've seen abdominal surgery with acupuncture anesthesia, on more than one occasion, but its effects are very short lived.

In my experience structural problems need to be treated structurally; chiropractic, physical therapy, surgery, etc. Herbals can speed up the healing process when these modalities are used and are thus a wonderful aide. Things need to be treated on the level of their primary dysfunction to have the best results in the shortest period of time.

The use of herbal medicine has been documented back to the Paleolithic people who lived in the caves of Lascaux 25,000 years ago. Herbal medicine evolved from a combination of observation and intuition and this experience was passed down from generation to generation and eventually codified and recorded in great tomes.

In more recent times, folk medicine or the traditional use of herbs has become recognized as a way to learn about potential future drugs. For example, in 2001 in the article "The Value of Plants Used in Traditional Medicine for Drug Discovery," researchers identified 122 compounds used in mainstream medicine which were derived from "ethnomedical" plant sources.

Over the millennia, plants have evolved the ability to synthesize chemical compounds that help them defend against attack from a wide variety of predators such as insects, fungi and herbivorous mammals. By chance, some of these compounds, while being toxic to plant predators, turn out to have beneficial effects when used to treat human diseases. At least 12,000 substances have been isolated so far; a number estimated to be less than 10 percent of the total available on our planet — if they don't become extinct from global warming and clear cutting first.

Chemical compounds in plants mediate their effects on the human body by binding to receptor molecules present in the body; such processes are identical to those already well understood for conventional drugs and as such herbal medicines do not differ greatly from conventional drugs in terms of how they work. This enables herbal medicines to be, in principle, just as effective as conventional drugs. Furthermore, the natural balance of compounds in the plant tends to reduce the occurrence of unwanted side effects. Many of the herbs and spices used to season our food have yielded useful medicinal compounds.

Send in your questions and be well.