

Air – something we all need, yet take for granted. The automatic process of breathing (although some people don't breathe properly) is something we don't give a second thought to, but for someone who suffers from asthma, they are very conscious – or should be – about this process. It is a very stressful occurrence, not only for the person suffering the attack, but also for any loved ones who witness it. In brief, what happens during an asthma attack is that the bronchi go into spasm as a result of an allergic reaction, anxiety or stress. This causes wheezing and breathlessness which is very distressing and can result in panic, which exacerbates the situation. This is more likely in children or elderly people, so calming herbs like catnip or California poppy in a mix are beneficial.

There are a number of things that should be avoided by people with asthma, which include:

Milk, peanuts, wheat, tree nuts, eggs, fish, shellfish, meat containing antibiotics or tenderising enzymes;

Preservatives – benzoates, sodium metabisulphite, antioxidants;

Dyes, artificial colours and flavours;

Red wines containing preservatives or antioxidants.

There is some politics involved in the business of asthma – which is a multi-million dollar business in Australia alone, not to mention the rest of the world. There are a number of herbs that are extremely effective in treating asthma that have been banned or put on the schedules list, including coltsfoot, lobelia, ma huang and comfrey. I will not get on my soap box about the politics of health at this point.

The following is a list of herbs that are good for asthma:

Catnip, comfrey, coltsfoot, elecampane, euphorbia, butterbur, ginkgo biloba, grindelia, ma huang, lobelia, pleurisy root, Japanese honeysuckle, senega, sundew, weeping golden bell, wild Chinese violet and wild cherry bark.

Coltsfoot – *Tussilago farfara*

This herb grows profusely and is a member of the *Compositae* family along with dandelion, daisy, tansy and yarrow. In England they have a large cough lolly called 'coltsfoot rock' which is very hard but enjoyable – a kind of all-day cough

herbs for asthma and other respiratory complaints

drop. This herb has been used for at least 2,500 years for coughs and is smoked to ease breathing. It is also used in herbal cigarettes. The common name is due to the shape of the leaves, and the Latin name refers to its use for coughs.

Parts used – leaves and flowers.

Properties – anti-catarthral, anti-tussive, anti-inflammatory, expectorant, demulcent, diuretic

Uses – coltsfoot has a wide range of uses in respiratory complaints like asthma, bronchitis, laryngitis, irritating coughs and whooping cough. It can also be used externally as a poultice for ulcers and sores. The reason for its efficacy in these conditions is that the leaves contain significant levels of zinc. The mucilage in the plant helps give it a very soothing effect which is beneficial in chronic emphysema. The plant contains an alkaloid called pyrrolizidine which can cause hepatotoxicity (liver toxicity) if taken in large doses. In clinical trials (Hirono, *et al*, 1976) it was shown not to cause any damage to human chromosomes in-vitro (in the test tube).

The amount needed to cause damage is extremely high but, nevertheless, caution should be exercised. The leaves should be used for no more than 3 to 4 weeks at a time and then a break taken. Also, coltsfoot should not be used during pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

Grindelia – *Grindelia camporum*

Also called 'gumplant' because of its resin content which makes it very sticky. Native Americans used it externally to treat poison ivy rashes and internally for bronchial complaints.

Parts used – aerial parts.

Properties – anti-asthmatic, antispasmodic, expectorant, hypotensive.

Uses – for treating asthma and bronchitis, especially in cases that are triggered by anxiety. This is because grindelia has a relaxing action on the heart muscles which is why it can be used to lower blood pressure, although not as effective as hawthorn or lavender. For whooping cough it can be combined with coltsfoot, horehound, sundew, thyme and a little honey as the horehound and thyme are a little bitter. If you have or get cystitis, it will help by soothing the irritation along with other herbs.

Grindelia's anti-spasmodic action is a primary factor in its treatment of asthma and bronchitis. It is also used for treating emphysema.

Sundew – *Drosera rotundifolia*

In the 16th and 17th centuries this herb was used to treat melancholy, which was the condition they related to the spleen and the element, Earth. In Chinese medicine the emotion related to the spleen is reflection or worry. It was also used externally to treat scrofulous sore.

Parts used – aerial parts.

Properties – anti-asthmatic, anti-spasmodic, anti-tussive, demulcent, expectorant.

Uses – it looks a little like a bright version of the Venus Fly Trap. Again like the other two herbs in this article it is used for any conditions involving spasms in the chest such as asthma, bronchial asthma and whooping cough. In scientific studies one of the compounds (*plumbagin*) showed anti-microbial action on parasitic protozoa, bacteria and pathogenic fungi. Also it is effective against streptococcus, staphylococcus and pneumococcus bacteria. It can be used in cough syrups with wild cherry bark, licorice, thyme, coltsfoot, fritillary and violet flowers or leaves.

If you have stomach ulcers, sundew will be of benefit with other herbs like golden seal, comfrey root, marshmallow root, meadowsweet and echinacea.

I see a number of patients who have varying degrees of asthma – and related problems like eczema – and we are having a good deal of success in dealing with these conditions.

Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any queries or would like further information on any of the herbs or topics I have written about.

Dipaunka Macrides is a herbalist with the Herbalist Naturopathic Clinic.

He can be contacted to answer any questions of a herbal nature by email: dpmherbs@iinet.net.au or by phone on 08 9335 6430 or write to him at PO Box 827, Fremantle WA 6959.

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