Medicinal Herbs - Preparation

The Basics

Herbs combine with the body's own healing mechanisms to fight disease and help maintain good health. Most herbs work slowly and must be taken for awhile to aid the body in healing. Being plant foods, herbs also contain vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, all of which aid the body in healing. Most herbs can be taken internally, or they can be used externally - in the form of infusions, poultices and ointments. Leaves, flowers, roots, and seeds can all be used to produce herbal remedies.

Following is a list of basic herbal preparations for medicinal use:

Absorbent Pads

Sterile absorbent pads can be made by boiling dried sphagnum moss, then drying it completely. The dried moss is best used wrapped in cloth to make wound dressings, sanitary napkins, or diapers.

Extracts

Extracts can be made at home by boiling off most of the liquid portion of fresh herbs, collecting the resultant mass, and then adding alcohol as a preservative. (High proof vodka is preferred.) To get the most strength from your extract, combine the herbs with water, boil it down to a paste, add more water, and repeat once or twice more, then add a minute amount of alcohol to preserve the herb.

Essential Oils

Homemade essential oils can be made by infusing herbs in undenatured ethyl alcohol (grain alcohol) or vodka, which should be at least 80 proof. Place desired herb in a non-metal container, fill with alcohol, making sure all plant material is submerged. Let sit for 1-3 weeks. Repeat the process several times, adding new plant material each time. You can separate the oil from the alcohol by freezing it. The alcohol will not freeze, but the oil will become solid and can be skimmed off the top.

Capsules

Dried herbs can be put into capsules for swallowing. Empty capsules can be found at your local health food store or through mail-order. Grind the dried herbs as near to a powder as you can.

Oil Infusions

Oil Infusions are excellent promoters of healing, to be applied externally to wounds or skin disorders. Fill a small jar with fresh herb and cover with olive oil. Place the jar in a saucepan of water up to the neck, bring the temperature up and simmer for about three hours. Strain this through a coffee filter (paper) or cloth into a brown glass bottle. You can repeat the process with the strained oil and fresh herbs to make the infusion stronger.
**Cold Oil Infusion**

Loosely pack a jar with desired herb. Fill with Olive oil, making sure all plant material is submerged. Place in a sunny spot for 6-8 weeks, rotate by turning jar upside down and up once a day. Strain into clean colored glass bottles or jars.

**Compresses**

Reduce the fresh herb to its essence by boiling to extract its soluble properties (See Decoctions, below). Dip a cloth into the hot liquid, squeeze out the excess and apply the hot cloth to the affected area. Repeat the process when the cloth cools.

**Creams**

Creams are a blend of oil and beeswax. To make your own, melt two ounces of beeswax in a double boiler, add one cup olive oil and blend. Add two ounces of your herb. Simmer for 20 minutes, mixing well. Add a drop of tincture of benzoin as a preservative. Strain through a cloth into a sterilized jar. Or, purchase an unscented, water based cream. Add the herb to the cream, simmer in a double boiler for 30 minutes, and strain.

**Decoctions**

Add one to two teaspoons of herb for each cup of cold water. Bring the mixture to a boil. Keep covered and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes. Decoctions are often the method of choice for tough herbs, such as bark and seeds.

**Infusions**

Basic infusions are made by adding 1 or 2 teaspoons of dried herbs or 2 to 4 teaspoons of fresh herbs to one cup of boiling water. Infuse for ten minutes before straining. If the herb is left too long, the infusion will become bitter. Avoid metal vessels. Ceramic or heat-proof glass is best. The standard dosage is one cup three times per day, taken hot or cold. Infusions for colds and flu should be taken hot. Infusions should be prepared on the day they are to be used.

**Herbal Wine**

Use sweet red wine with an alcohol content of at least 12%. Cover four ounces of herb with three cups of wine. Allow to sit for three weeks, then strain. Take four teaspoons, once or twice daily. Use within one month.

**Ointments**

Whereas creams penetrate the skin, ointments cover and protect it. Use petroleum jelly as your base. Melt it in a double boiler and add lots of herbs, making sure that the melted jelly covers them. Simmer until the herbs are crisp. More herbs may be added to make the ointment stronger. Strain into jars while hot.
**Plasters**

Plasters are herbal powders mixed with cornstarch and applied to the affected area to provide heat, reduce swelling, or allow for absorption of the herb into the chest or other area. Some plasters can actually burn the skin, so the mixture is usually wrapped in cloth. This also facilitates easy removal.

**Poultices**

Poultices are good for boils, abscesses, chest infections and sprains. Mix chopped herb or powdered seeds with boiling water to make a pulp. Place the pulp in a piece of cloth and apply to the affected area while hot. It should be replaced when cool. A thin layer of cream will protect the skin and prevent the poultice from sticking.

**Steam, Inhalants**

Use steam for skin problems like acne and an inhalant for bronchial problems. Add a strong decoction, one or two drops of essential oils, or 2 teaspoons of tincture to boiling water.

**Syrup**

Sugar is a good preservative and is ideal for cough mixtures, especially since some herbs are bitter. Prepare two parts of an infusion or decoction of the required herb. Strain and add 1 3/4 parts brown sugar or a honey and sugar mixture. Heat gently until the sugar dissolves. Pour into a clean glass bottle and seal. Store in refrigerator.

**Tinctures**

A tincture is an alcoholic extraction of herb. Alcohol dissolves the active properties out of the plant and acts as a preservative, allowing the tincture to retain its effectiveness for up to two years. Any part of the plant may be used. Place four ounces of dried herb in a glass jar with a tight fitting lid and add two cups of vodka. Leave for two weeks, shaking occasionally, then strain through a cloth into a brown glass bottle. Keep tightly closed and away from direct light. The standard dosage is 15 drops three times daily.