

Herbs with Nervine Activity

Damiana

Turnera diffusa leaf has been used by the indigenous people of Mexico as an invigorator and aphrodisiac,¹ for muscular and nervous debility (especially after long journeys or hunts),² and in inflammatory conditions such as orchitis and nephritis.³ Since the ancient Mayan civilization Damiana has been used as an aphrodisiac.⁴

In the western herbal medicine tradition Damiana is regarded as a nervine tonic with application to lowered libido of both sexes. It also has antidepressant and stomachic activity and has been used for depression, nervous dyspepsia and anxiety neurosis with a predominant sexual factor.^{5,6} In 1904, the Eclectic physician John Uri Lloyd noted that Damiana was often consumed by men, women and children in Mexico as pleasant tasting tea with a gentle stimulating and tonic action.⁷

Anxiolytic activity has been demonstrated in mice orally administered with mother tincture of Damiana.⁸

Skullcap

Scutellaria lateriflora aerial parts have been traditionally used to treat nervous tension and epilepsy.⁵ It was also used by Eclectic physicians for nervousness with fatigue or depression. Skullcap is described as tonic and antispasmodic, acting through the nervous system,⁹ and is of benefit for nervous disorders characterised by irregular muscular action such as twitching, tremors and restlessness.⁶

A contemporary view supports the use of Skullcap for nervous tension due to chronic stress, illness or exhaustion; for neuralgia, insomnia as well as depression.¹⁰

Historically herbal products containing Skullcap have been found to be adulterated, sometimes with the potentially toxic *Teucrium* spp. In addition, until about 2002 there was very little reliable information available about its constituents. Analytical methods have been developed and the characteristic phytochemical profile is now known.^{11,12} Practitioners are advised to use Skullcap products from manufacturers using this analytical methodology.

Schisandra

Schisandra chinensis (*Schizandra chinensis*) fruit is indicated in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for a wide variety of conditions. It quiets the spirit while calming and containing the *Heart qi*, hence is used to treat irritability, palpitations, dream-disturbed sleep and insomnia. It is also used in this tradition for neurasthenia.¹³⁻¹⁵ Schisandra has been used in the Far East as a tonic, particularly in fatigue. Indigenous Siberians used dried Schisandra berries to combat fatigue during their hunting trips. Often the hunters roamed for days subsisting on nothing but the fresh or dried berries, and showed no signs of fatigue.¹⁶⁻¹⁸

A single dose of Schisandra improved race times, reduced heart rate and facilitated recovery in race and show jump horses.^{19,20}

Uncontrolled trials indicate that Schisandra enhances mental and physical efficiency in healthy volunteers,¹¹ and had benefit for patients with hallucinations, paranoia and neurosis.²¹ An observational study reported in 1949 that Schisandra extract improved general physical and mental well being in 4 of 8 patients diagnosed as schizophrenic. Complete recovery was observed in all 10 cases of asthenodepressive syndrome. Improvement in work capacity was reported in the healthy volunteers.²²

St John's Wort

Hypericum perforatum aerial parts have been used in western herbal medicine primarily for the nervous system, particularly indicated for nervous afflictions (including anxiety and depression), disorders of the spine including neuralgia, sciatica and wounds where nerves are involved. The *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* 1983 lists St John's Wort with a specific indication of menopausal neurosis.^{5,23,24}

A systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2005 suggests that standardised extracts of St John's Wort may be effective for treating mild to moderate depression. They demonstrate greater efficacy than placebo and similar efficacy as standard antidepressants for this condition. The most commonly prescribed dosage was standardised extract corresponding to 3.8-4.5 g of dried herb. Side effects are usually minor and uncommon.²⁵

St John's Wort has also shown clinical benefit in other nervous system disorders including somatoform disorders,^{26,27} fatigue in depressed patients,²⁸ anxiety-related symptoms in premenstrual tension²⁹ as well as herpes³⁰ and polyneuropathy.³¹ The most common daily dosage prescribed was 900 mg of standardised extract which probably corresponded to approximately 5 g of dried herb. The herpes trials used this dosage for prevention but it was doubled during acute outbreaks.

Synergistic Formulation

These herbs would complement each other in a very potent formulation with predominantly nervine activity.

Indications

- Nervous exhaustion, fatigue.
- Mild to moderate depression, where additional nervous system support is required.
- To relieve mild anxiety, sleeplessness and insomnia.
- Lowered libido related to nervous tension.

Cautions and Contraindications

St John's Wort may cause hyperesthesia in some sensitive individuals especially when combined with a high exposure to sunlight or artificial UVA light. St John's Wort is contraindicated in those taking indinavir (HIV protease inhibitor), cyclosporin (immunosuppressive agent) and warfarin. Caution is advised for patients taking other HIV protease inhibitors, non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors, theophylline, digoxin, anticonvulsants, oral contraceptives, selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors and triptans (migraine medication).

Schisandra is contraindicated in pregnancy, except at birth. According to TCM Schisandra is contraindicated in the early stages of cough or rash and in excess heat patterns.

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