

Alternatives

Diarrhoea

Diarrhea is generally a healthy, cleansing response to some passing irritation of the gut. In some instances it can be caused by infection (food poisoning or dysentery) or by food allergies or intolerances. Occasionally it can herald something serious like ulcerative colitis or even cancer, so the underlying cause of severe or long-standing diarrhea should always be investigated.

Down the ages and across many cultures, herbal preparations have been used to treat diarrhea successfully.

● Cutch, a derivative of the acacia, is used in many parts of Africa. (C Wehmer, *Die Pflanzstoffe*, 2nd ed, Jena: Fischer, 1931; suppl 1935; Black Catechu: *British Pharmacopoeia*, 1949; and W Martindale, *The Extra Pharmacopoeia*, vol I, 24th ed, London: The Pharmaceutical Press, 1958, p 1286).

● The seed of *Argemone mexicana* has a long history as a safe and effective remedy for colic, cholera, diarrhea and dysentery in India (G Dragendorff, *Die Heilpflanzen der verschiedenen Völker und Zeiten*, Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1898). As a member of the poppy fam-

ily, its seeds yield both morphine, which slows down intestinal transit (Alkaloids, 1975; 15: 207-251), and berberine (Rev Agric Èle Maurice, 1941; 20: 273 & 329; J Ind Chem Soc, 1956; 33: 351), is effective against diarrhea caused by *Shigella dysenteriae*, *Giardia lamblia*, *Vibrio cholerae*, *Salmonella paratyphi*, and *Klebsiella* species (Am J Dis Child, 1975; 129: 866; Br Med J, 1985; 291: 1601-1605).

● *Asteracantha longifolia* contains large amounts of potassium salts, maltose and mucilage (Ind J Med Res, 1934; 22: 263) which help to restore electrolyte balance, as well as soothing the gut.

● Blackjack, or Beggartick, is an antidiarrheal remedy from Tanzania. It acts against microorganisms such as *Staphylococcus aureus*, but has no effect on the normal gut flora (Antibiotic Chemotherapy, 1952; 2: 487; Pacif Sci, 1950; 4: 167).

● Blackcurrant juice has an antidiarrheal action similar to that of bloodroot (Dtsch Apoth Ztg, 1983; 75: 224-23; British Pharmaceutical Codex, London: The Pharmaceutical Press, 1963, p 99 & 1220-21).

Scientifically proven alternatives to conventional medicine

● A concentrated decoction of dried blueberries, or bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) is used in many parts of Europe, especially for children who often enjoy the taste.

● For centuries, flour made from carob seed (*Cerotonia siliqua*) has been used successfully for diarrhea, and as infant food in cases of habitual vomiting. It should be mixed with water, added to the food and then cooled (J Paed Gastroenterol Nutr, 1989; 8: 480-5).

● Tea made from fennel seed (*Foeniculum vulgare*) is used to treat diarrhea in children in the Balkans and southern Europe. Its main active ingredients are fenchone and anethol, which have a carminative effect. It is routinely given to children before bed to prevent night-time colic.

● In parts of Africa young shoots of Khiga Theepe (*Celosia Trigyna*) are used to treat tapeworm and roundworm and associated abdominal distress.

● Classical homeopathy has recently produced a most impressive study on this topic. A randomized double-blind clinical trial of young children comparing individualized homeopathic reme-

dies with placebo found that those taking homeopathy recovered more quickly (Pediatrics, 1994; 93(5): 719-25).

One of the biggest dangers of diarrhea is dehydration. I found the following drink useful to counteract the effects of traveller's diarrhea when in Africa. Make up a tea by mixing half a tablespoon of both fennel seeds and dried peppermint leaves with half a litre of boiled water. Add a quarter of a teaspoon of table salt, an eighth of a teaspoon of both sodium bicarbonate and potassium chloride ("lo salt"), and one tablespoon of glucose. Drink as much of it as possible and also supplement with water-soluble B-complex and C vitamins.

Harald Gaier

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