

Comparison of Medieval and Modern Herbal Preparations & Their Therapeutic Value

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Just as Nature is unpredictable, so are Her herbs, thus there is a wide range of effect from a single herb, and how it is prepared can vastly effect the results of an herbal treatment program. This article glosses over the different preparations. Not all preparations, or herbs prepared in a specific form, are appropriate in treating a given illness, and some can be downright deadly.

Medicinal Carriers

One of the common methods of using some herbs is not to prepare it at all. A good example is with modern-day Plantain, also called Waybread in Saxon times. This plant can be plucked from the ground, macerated (by hand, or by mouth) and placed onto a wound. This is not an appropriate method of preparation for all plants, as raw use may cause contact dermatitis with some plants, and some should not be chewed raw. Raw preparations include a poultice, pills, powders, salads, dried, eaten or worn.

Aside from the raw plant material itself, there are ways of carrying the desirable medicinal properties of a plant into other substances, increasing its effectiveness, portability, shelf life or its palatability. Sometimes the way a plant medicine is prepared simply makes it easier to prescribe & measure. Carrier substances include oil, alcohol (wine, vodka or "aqua vitae"), sugar, water, wax, grease, and syrups.

Preparation of Herbal Medicines

Herbs (ingested): pills, powders, salads, juices, cooked greens

Value: When a full herb is ingested, the herb and all of its ingredients are digested, both desirable and undesirable. Other preparations allow for the concentration of desirable substances and the discarding of the undesirable, thus making a medicine more reliable and predictable. This method is frequently used when an herb is gentle and tonic, a food to begin with, or when all the substances contained therein are desired. Juiced plants are sometimes exceptionally concentrated and might very well serve as a vitamin supplement.

Middle Ages: Pills & powders were used in the Middle Ages. Fresh medicinal herbs are eaten, or washed down with drink. Juice is used internally and externally in the Middle Ages. Powder is often mixed with a liquid and drunk, which is not the same as Tinctures or Infusions (below), where the herb is soaked then removed from the liquid. The powder is carrying the effect of the herbs, not the liquid.

Modern: Pills & powders are in current use. They are very similar in their therapeutic effects. A pill is made in two different ways: high-pressure compression of herb powder with other ingredients, or a gelatin capsule filled with powdered dried herb. There is mention of therapeutic and tonic value to eating some fresh herbs in modern herbalism.

Herbs (external): powders, poultices, juices, worn

Value: Herbs can be applied externally for many reasons, not least of which is styptic. Herbs can also ease itchy or swollen eyes and ear infections, and they can disinfect wounds.

Middle Ages: Herbal juices were used both alone and with other substances for many topical applications, especially eye complaints. Poultices are sometimes made from fresh herbs held to the skin. The herbs can be "pounded" for greater effect. In theory, wearing an herb might use the sense of smell to derive an effect upon the body.

Modern: Powders, poultices and juices are applied externally for some complaints, such as powders for diaper rash, poultices for wounds, juices for pink eye, etc. Rarely are herbs worn for medicinal purposes in modern herbal medicine. A possible example for wearing herbs might be wearing sprigs of aromatic plants to ward off insects.

Kindled (breathed): fumigation (cleaning with smoke), incense (herbs smoked for scent), smoking (inhaling smoke)

Value: Ash and smoke carry compounds of the herb directly into the lungs, and thus into the bloodstream. Unlike modern day cigarettes, herbs do not always contain harmful substances such as nicotine or tar, however all smoked herbs will transmit carbon monoxide, and other possibly harmful substances. This method of medication is not highly recommended. Smoke has been used as a cleansing "substance" in many cultures since antiquity.

Middle Ages: Fumigation and incense were both used in medieval times, and especially during the plague, where illness was thought to be carried on the air. Hildegard of Bingen prescribed "herbulae fumantes" for colds with runny noses. Fragrant herbs are strewn on a heated earthenware pot so they smoke. (Strehlow, p. 22) I have also found mention of external application of herbal ashes for sore joints. (*A Medieval Herbal*, p. 35)

Modern: Fumigation is still seen in "smudging". Incense is generally used in aromatherapy. Smoking, usually marijuana when not referring to tobacco, is still used therapeutically in treatment of deadly and painful diseases. Other herbs, such as mullein and comfrey, are smoked as well.

Water (ingested): tea, tisane (the technical term for modern "tea"), infusion (herbs steeped in hot water as it cools), decoction (herbs boiled in water), soup

Value: Water-soluble substances in plants include chlorophyll, minerals and vitamins, which can have effects ranging from mild tonic to remarkably curative. One of the desirable effects of a water-based herbal preparation is that very few of the plant's alkaloids, resins, or oils are water-soluble.

Middle Ages: To "seethe" in water is a common medical instruction of the Middle Ages. Holy water is also an ingredient of medicinal drinks. There are also instructions in the making of Rose Water, both by using heated water, and by letting the mixture sit in the sun for 30 days. (*A Medieval Herbal*, p.50-51)

Modern: Water is currently used in preparation of herbal medication in the form of herbal teas, decoctions and infusions.

Water (inhaled): steam inhalation, aspiration, nebulizer

Value: When herbs are boiled, nutrients, essential oils and other volatile substances are lost in the steam. Enclosed containers are normally used to retard this process. It may be desirable to inhale the steam of steeping herbs to introduce these substances directly into our lungs. In addition, steam itself can help to moisturize the tissues of the lungs, thus having beneficial effects for dry conditions.

Middle Ages: There is no evidence that steam from steeping herbs was a medicinal therapy in the Middle Ages.

Modern: Asthmatics use inhaled medication. Herbs are boiled and the steam is inhaled for their medicinal benefits today.

Water (topical): plasters, poultices, baths, washes, gargles

Value: Plasters can be made with either powdered herbs moistened with water and spread onto the skin, or with water and herbs mixed with clay or another pasty substance. Clay itself has therapeutic value in the treatment of dermatological complaints. A poultice can be made with fresh or dried herbs moistened with hot or cold water fastened by cloth to the skin. Baths and washes are topical applications of infused (steeped) herbs. The skin is the largest organ of the body, and it is not only an organ of elimination but of absorption, although we usually do not think of it this way. Nutrients, tannins, and other substances in the preparations can nurture, protect, heal and rehydrate the skin. Gargles are normally used for throat complaints. Gargles also serve as a direct topical application to the tonsils, larynx, lymph glands and esophagus/trachea.

Middle Ages: Plasters, poultices, baths & gargles are therapies mentioned in medieval medical resources. Some similar preparations use honey with the herbal substance instead of water.

Modern: All of these methods are currently in use.

Candied (ingested): syrup, lozenge

Value: There is value to making the less palatable herbs more palatable, since it is important that herbs be taken as prescribed, not put off due to unpleasant flavor. As well, sugar often aids in absorption of some herbal substances. Lozenges direct the absorption to the mouth and throat tissue, which makes them more useful for mouth and throat complaints. A lozenge also works as a time-release capsule. Syrups are often concentrated from infused herbs with the addition of honey, and their shelf life is extended to one or two months rather than days.

Middle Ages: Herbs were often prepared in syrup form. Lozenges were probably not as hard as they are today, but had a stiff, fudge-like consistency. Powdered herbs were mixed with honey to make a candied medicine.

Modern: Ricola (R) is one example of an herbal lozenge. Homemade herbal lozenges more closely resemble the consistency of those of the Middle Ages.

Spirits (ingested): tincture (alcoholic liquid in which herbs have been steeped), medicinal wine, etc.

Value: Alkaloids and resins are alcohol-soluble substances found in plants with demonstrable medicinal effects. Alcohol is a superb carrier of medicines to the bloodstream, due to the speed at which alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream. Alcohol itself has therapeutic value as a pain killer and sedative.

Middle Ages: There is mention of tinctures in the Middle Ages, such as Tincture of Opium (le Strange, p. 198). I am uncertain if the alcohol content compared to a modern-day tincture. Medicinal wines were common, and Aqua Vitae was introduced as a medicinal ingredient in the 13th century (Siraisi, p. 148). The alcohol content of Aqua Vitae is uncertain, thus affecting the dosages. Wine-based doses probably ranged from a mouthful to a cupful.

Modern: 50% alcohol solutions (ex: 100 proof vodka) are commonly used for current "tinctures", dosages are numbered in drops and "dropperfuls". This appears comparable to medieval doses, considering the alkaloid content of the solution.

Spirits (topical): liniments (alcoholic liquids in which herbs have been steeped), antiseptics

Value: Liniments carry essential oils, resins and alkaloids to the skin. The skin is capable of absorbing some of these substances. Alcohol also has the effect of being antibacterial, thus decreasing the chance of infection from wounds.

Middle Ages: Wine & wine-soaked herbs (later including Aqua Vitae (ibid.)) were used to cleanse wounds and to treat certain skin conditions.

Modern: Alcohol-solutions are still used topically, but usually are non-palatable alcohols (i.e.: rubbing alcohol, witch hazel). Some tinctures may be applied topically.

Oils (ingested): infused oils (oils in which plant matter has been steeped), some essential oils (volatile oils expressed or distilled from plant matter)

Value: Oil-based preparations extract oil-soluble vitamins and plant oils. Some oils (ex: Olive Oil) have therapeutic value in and of themselves.

Middle Ages: There is mention of making "oyle of roses" which is certainly an infused oil, though the means of using said oil is not mentioned. The type of "oyle" used in the preparation is also not mentioned. Olive oil was pressed in the Middle Ages, and it is possibly the substance used in this preparation. Olive oil also has its own medicinal benefits, as does Castor Oil, which was also in use in the Middle Ages.

Modern: Although rare, some herbal oil infusions are ingested. Olive oil is becoming increasingly noted for its therapeutic and medicinal value. Castor oil is still in use today.

Oils (topical): infused oils, essential oils

Value: The absorbency of skin has been mentioned with topical water-based infusions (above), and oils are a normal substance found on our outer layer of skin, as a protective agent, and also in the production of Vitamin D. Oils trap moisture onto our skin, easing dry skin conditions.

Middle Ages: The most likely oils to be used were lard or other animal fats, and thus oil preparations would solidify at room temperature, putting them more into the ointment category. I do not believe people worked with essential oils as such, however some plants may have been used fresh for the value of the essential oils therein. Some plants were pressed for their oils.

Modern: Oils are pressed or expelled from plant substances, giving us our olive oil, canola oil, etc. that are used in modern infused oils. There are also inorganic oils available to us (i.e. mineral oil, petroleum jelly), although their uses are more limited due to the lack of absorption. Essential oils are distilled from plant substances and are extremely volatile. Although they are most often used in aromatherapy, topical applications of some essential oils are of therapeutic value.

Ointments (topical): ointments, salves

Value: Ointments have a longer shelf life than oils and are less likely to spill, however they generally have the same medicinal benefits of oils. Wax or grease is used with herbs or oils to thicken the preparation. Beeswax and lanolin, two of the substances used currently to thicken ointments, have their own therapeutic value.

Middle Ages: Ointments and salves were used for many medieval complaints. Herbs were pounded in grease, and powdered herbs were mixed into salves.

Modern: From chapped lips to diaper rash, ointments and salves are used extensively in the modern era, both herbal and pharmaceutical.

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- As well as information from Amanda McQuade, Pam Montgomery, Letha Hadadi, Deb Soule and many others.