

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

Herbs for Back Pain

Low-back pain (LBP) can range from mildly annoying to completely debilitating. And the drugs used to mask the pain? Research indicates that they may actually worsen an already dreadful situation.

“Many drugs used for back pain are no more, or only slightly more, effective than placebos,” note the authors of a particularly significant report. “Others have side effects that outweigh their usefulness in relieving pain. On the basis of the evidence, no drug regimen can be legitimately recommended for back pain.” (Expert Opin Pharmacother 2004;5:2091-8.)

That’s why a growing number of people are turning to chiropractic care as an effective method for ending LBP. Not only is regularly scheduled chiropractic care more effective than drugs, but a study published last year also shows that patients with LBP who undergo chiropractic care require significantly fewer related office visits, compared with patients who receive physical therapy. These findings were based on a study of 195 patients with LBP (*Chiropr Osteopat* 2006;14:19).

One of the primary instigators of LBP, according to Dr. Gravesen, is misaligned spinal bones (vertebrae). This common condition, known as **vertebral subluxation**, can also spark carpal tunnel syndrome, joint pain and a host of other problems.

Dr. Gravesen corrects vertebral subluxations with safe, gentle maneuvers known as **chiropractic adjustments**. In some cases, additional all-natural approaches — such as herbal remedies — may also be recommended as adjunctive therapy to chiropractic care. Read on to learn more about the latest research regarding herbs for LBP.

Devilish Name, Heavenly Relief

Harpagophytum procumbens — better known as devil’s claw — is so named because of the miniature hooks dotting

this twisted root’s discolored surface. Despite its wicked moniker, however, strong evidence shows that devil’s claw has a host of angelic qualities (*Spine* 2007;32:82-92).

Native to southern Africa, devil’s claw was introduced to Europe in the early 1900s. Since then, the dried roots of this leafy perennial have been used to restore appetite, relieve heartburn and reduce pain and inflammation.

In a study of 63 people with mild to moderate back, neck or shoulder pain, researchers from the University of Maryland Medical Center (UMMC) found that a four-week regimen of standardized extract of devil’s claw root provided moderate relief from muscle pain.



Results were similar during another four-week experiment, when 197 men and women with chronic LBP received daily doses of devil’s claw extract or placebo. Researchers noted that the devil’s-claw group reported experiencing less pain and took fewer pain-killing medications than those who received placebo (*Eur J Anaesthesiol* 1999;16:118-29).

Because all devil’s claw studies to date have involved only adults, experts advise against its use in children.



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The following are the adult dosage guidelines:

- Dried tuber or dried root powder: 100 mg to 250 mg three times a day
- Capsules containing dried root powder: 100 mg to 250 mg three times a day
- Liquid extract (1:1 in 25 percent alcohol): two to seven drops three times a day
- Tincture (1:5 in 25 percent alcohol): 10 to 30 drops three times a day

Although the researchers note that devil's claw is nontoxic and safe "with virtually no side effects if taken at the recommended therapeutic dose for short periods of time," it's vital to never add any form of supplementation to your diet without talking to your chiropractor first. That's because there are a number of factors to consider, including your current chiropractic care regimen and past and current health issues.

For instance, it's important to let the doctor know if you have a history of stomach ulcers, duodenal ulcers or gallstones. That's because high doses of devil's claw can cause mild gastrointestinal problems with long-term use. The root's safety for pregnant and breastfeeding women is also not known, so it should be avoided during these times.

The UMMC researchers also note that devil's claw may interact with warfarin (a blood-thinning medication), causing bruising or bleeding disorders. "For this reason, individuals taking warfarin should not use devil's claw."

No Weeping From This Willow

Extract of white willow bark (*salix alba*), in daily doses of 120 mg to 240 mg, was also better than placebo for short-term improvements in pain (*Spine* 2007;32:82-92). The key to its success? The strong anti-inflammatory power of its primary component: all-natural salicylic acid.

Once ingested, salicin — a component of white willow bark — is converted to salicylic acid. Aspirin is also converted to salicylic acid, which is why you should not take white willow bark extract and aspirin simultaneously.

German researchers, noting the widespread use of white willow bark extract in Europe, conducted a study of 210 patients with chronic LBP. Over a four-week period, 67 patients received 120 mg (low dose) of white willow bark extract, 65 received 240 mg (high dose) and 59 received placebo. After four weeks, 21 percent of the low-dose group and 39 percent of the high-dose group were pain-free. What's even better, "The response in the high-dose group was evident after only one week of treatment." (*Am J Med* 2000;109:9.)



Spicy Relief

Capsaicin — also known by its Latin name, *Capsicum frutescens* — is the component responsible for chili peppers' spicy zing. Capsaicin can also heat things up when used in topical creams: providing warm and surprisingly soothing relief (*Spine* 2007;32:82-92).

"Repeated applications of capsaicin brings about a long lasting desensitization to pain," according to German researchers who conducted a three-week study of capsaicin on 154 patients suffering from back pain. "The efficacy ratings by observers and pa-

tients was definitely in favor of capsaicin." (*Arzneimittelforschung* 2001;51:896-903.)

Because of its potent burning and stinging properties, doctors recommend wearing gloves when applying capsaicin cream. It's also important to avoid touching the eyes or any areas of broken skin.

Open Communication Vital

In a case study that included 758 patients attending 21 chiropractic clinics in Australia, researchers asked participants whether they had informed their chiropractor about any of the medications, herbs or nutrients they were consuming.

The result was shocking. "More than 1 in 3 of the chiropractic patients in this study were taking, either on the advice of a health professional or, more often, on their own initiative, a nutritional supplement and/or herb. Yet, chiropractors were only occasionally informed about the medication practices of their patients." (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2003;26:242.)

To provide the most comprehensive care possible, your doctor of chiropractic must be aware of all past and present medical conditions as well as all current dietary supplementations.

It's also vital that the doctor is aware of any herbal remedies you are taking or interested in taking, as there may be side effects you should know about.

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