

# **Top 6 Most Powerful Herbs for Better Health**



Herbs that can change your life and dramatically improve your health  
*By Marilyn Zink*

# Top 6 Herbs to Improve Health

## Introduction

Herbs are great for improving health, but it's important to know exactly which herbs are the most effective .

I'm going to break it down into several critical areas that affect a person's health and which herbs are best for that. For each herb, I'll also tell you its' healing history, therapeutic use, how to use it and any contraindications to be aware of. There may be other herbs that can do the job.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is a place to start to understand herbs. I have used herbs for more than 25 years and I have used the herbs listed at one time or another so I can vouch for their effectiveness.

Herbs are effective, especially when used properly and for the right reasons. That means they're used for the right conditions in the correct doses. The body strives to create balance or homeostasis and herbs can help with this.

These main areas affecting the body are; lack of sleep, fatigue or lack of energy, digestive health, immune health, stress relievers and hormone balancers.

Often people think that they should use a particular

herb everyday or that if they don't notice an immediate effect, more of the herb should be taken.

Neither of these are true.

Herbs can have a dramatic effect but they often tend to work on a more subtle level to improve the body.

This is the way we have been trained to think with the medicine we take - that if we don't feel immediate results it's not working.

As many herbs are taken for chronic conditions it will take a while to see results. Herbs taken continuously, such as an adaptogen, should be taken in cycles.

Having said that, you should notice an effect within a month though it can take a little longer if you are trying to achieve hormonal balance.

For acute conditions, such as a cold or flu, you will tend to notice an effect much more quickly, often within days.

After a month or so with a chronic condition, take a little break from the herb and see if it makes a difference.

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### Valerian for Better Sleep

People who suffer from insomnia or poor sleep can benefit from the herb Valerian.

Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) can have a hypnotic effect on the user, calming them and getting them ready for sleep.

#### Healing History

Valerian has a healing history as a 'calmative...for epilepsy..mild spasmodic affections...and hypochondria' according to the Eclectic physicians, who were America's 19th century forerunners to naturopaths.

David Hoffman's Holistic Herbal deems valerian as 'one of the most useful relaxing herbs.'

So herbalists use it today for nervousness, anxiety, insomnia, headache and intestinal cramps.

In Germany where herbs are more mainstream, valerian is used in more than 100 over-the-counter sleep aids and tranquilizers.

#### Therapeutic Uses

Many studies have proven valerian's effectiveness as a sedative.

German researchers in one study gave 128 people with insomnia either a placebo or 400 milligrams of valerian root every day.

Those who took the herb had better sleep quality without any side effects such as morning grogginess.

In another study German scientists gave 68 adults with chronic insomnia either a placebo or a sleep aid with 320 milligrams of valerian and 160 milligrams of lemon balm, which is also an herbal sedative.

The people who took the herbs reported falling asleep faster, enjoying longer sleep and a greater sense of well-being. The plus is that there were no side effects in the morning.

In another German trial with children who suffered

from insomnia, 918 children were given valerian with 81% showing significant improvement in sleep duration and quality.

Valerian is a safer sedative to use than prescription drugs which can cause dependence and addiction, as well as morning grogginess.

#### To Use:

Purchase commercial valerian root extract or tincture and follow the label directions. Herbalists discourage using an infusion or tea as valerian has a foul taste.

#### Contraindications:

Unusually large amounts of valerian may cause headache, giddiness, blurred vision, restless, nausea and morning grogginess.

### Ginseng for More Energy

Many people complain about a lack of energy or just feeling fatigued or constantly tired.

It's important to look at the reasons for fatigue, particularly as it can relate to an underlying health condition.

Once that is ruled out, then consider using ginseng for an energy boost and an overall sense of well-being.

There are two main types of ginseng; Panax Ginseng (which is Korean or Chinese) and Panax Quinquifolius (which is American).

While Chinese physicians make distinctions between the two plants, Western scientists generally consider them the same.

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## Healing History

Ginseng's healing history goes back to ancient times in China, figuring prominently in the first great Chinese herbal, the Pen Tsao Ching (The Classic of Herbs) around 3000 B.C.

It was reportedly compiled by the emperor-sage Shen Nung who recommended it for enlightening the mind and increasing wisdom, and noted that regular use 'leads to longevity.'

The popularity of ginseng in China spread to the west and by the 1700s ginseng fever had hit. American Ginseng, Green Gold by Scott Parsons, reported that ginseng was popular among pioneers as famous as Daniel Boone, who combined it with trapping and scouting.

The first Western scientists to seriously investigate ginseng were two Russian pharmacologists, who in 1947 coined the term adaptogen to describe the ability of ginseng and other herbs to help the body resist physical and emotional stressors.

The scientists, N.V. Lazarev, Ph.D and his student Israel I. Brekhman, Ph.D. of the Academy of Sciences of the former Soviet Union, discovered that ginseng increases resistance to disease and has a strengthening effect on the body with few side effects.

## Therapeutic Uses

Ginseng contains a collection of compounds known as ginsenosides, which as an adaptogen works by giving the body a tune-up without overpowering the body. Taken over time, adaptogens are very beneficial to improved health.

Since Ginseng is a non-caffeinated stimulant, it helps with fatigue and lack of energy.

When European researchers studied 232 people who

complained of fatigue, they gave half a placebo and the rest a formula containing 80 milligrams of ginseng along with vitamins and minerals.

The group taking ginseng experienced more energy and less lethargy. Researchers have concluded that ginseng combats fatigue by supporting the adrenal glands. In addition, ginseng also increases stamina and improves a sense of general well-being.

## To Use:

Ginseng can be taken as a root powder, teas, tinctures, capsules or tinctures.

To prepare tea, use 1 to 1 tsp. of powdered root per cup of boiling water. Simmer for about 15 minutes, strain if desired and drink up to 2 cups a day.

## Contraindications

As ginseng is a stimulant, people taking large doses have reported nervousness and restlessness.

Ginseng may also have an effect on other stimulants such as caffeine, causing over-stimulation.

People with insomnia, breast soreness, allergy symptoms, asthma attacks, increased blood pressure and heart rhythm disturbances (cardiac arrhythmia) should use ginseng with caution. Those with asthma, high blood pressure or cardiac arrhythmia or fever should only use ginseng in consultation with a doctor, if at all.

As ginseng has anti-clotting action, it should be off limits to people who have blood clotting problems or are taking anti-coagulant (blood thinning) medications. Stop using ginseng two weeks before scheduled surgery.



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# Peppermint for Digestive Health

Peppermint has long been known as ‘the’ herb for soothing the tummy.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) and spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) are both great herbs for the stomach though peppermint has stronger healing properties.

### Healing History

Mint was mentioned as a stomach soother in the world’s oldest surviving medical text known as the Ebers Papyrus.

At one time mint was accepted as payment for taxes, that’s how popular it was.

In the 17th century, the famous English herbalist Nicholas Culpeper wrote that “mint is very profitable to the stomach....especial to dissolve wind (and) help colic.”

After Culpeper’s time, herbalists decided that peppermint was better for digestion than spearmint. In the early 1880s chemists distilled menthol from peppermint oil and since then it has been touted for a variety of uses in addition to a digestive aid.

### Therapeutic Uses

Peppermint has the active ingredient menthol while spearmint has carvone.

Herbalists agree that menthol is more potent and widely used.

Since menthol was distilled, it was touted as having active properties against germs and also great anesthetic power for treating wounds, burns, scalds, insect bites and stings, eczema, hives and toothache. The menthol vapors were used in inhalants and chest rubs to relieve asthma, hay fever and morning sickness.

But peppermint is mostly known for its effect on the digestive tract; from bad breath to indigestion and irritable bowel syndrome.

Both menthol and carvone are anti-spasmodic, which means they soothe the smooth muscles of the digestive tract and prevent muscle spasm. This is especially important for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) which causes symptoms like abdominal cramps, bloating, flatulence, diarrhea or constipation.

When Danish researchers reviewed 16 trials by IBS sufferers who took enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules one to three times a day, 58 per cent reported relief compared to 29 per cent taking a placebo. Commission E, the expert panel in Germany that evaluates herbal medicine, has endorsed peppermint for indigestion and abdominal distress.

### To Use:

Peppermint tea is one of the best ways to use it for soothing the tummy.

Peppermint can also be massaged on the stomach as an essential oil diluted with a massage oil or the essential oil can be added to the bath.

Peppermint is also available in capsules or tablets or as part of a formula to improve digestive health.

### Contraindications

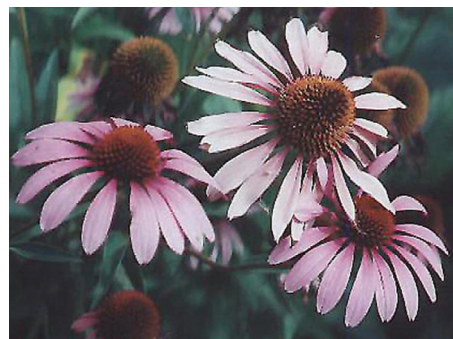
Do not ingest pure menthol – as little as a teaspoon can be fatal.

Pregnant women who want to try peppermint for morning sickness should try it in diluted tea concentrations. Women with a history of miscarriage should avoid the herb while pregnant.



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# Echinacea for Immune Building



Echinacea (*Echinacea angustifolia* and *Echinacea purpurea*) is known as an immunity booster though it has certainly had its ups and downs along the way. The herb is a tall daisy-like flower native to the Great Plains in America and was the main herbal medicine for Native Americans.

### Healing History

Echinacea was a folk remedy until the 1970s until it was used in Meyer's Blood Purifier by Dr. Meyer who truly believed it could cure rattlesnake bite.

He sent a sample to John Uri Lloyd, professor at the Eclectic Medical Pharmaceutical who took one look at the 'cure' and dismissed Dr. Meyer as a crackpot. Then Dr. Meyer shipped some to Dr. Lloyd's colleague, John King, who tested the herb and used it to treat bee stings, chronic nasal congestion, leg ulcers and other infections successfully.

Eventually Lloyd came around and declared Echinacea was also useful for diphtheria, meningitis, measles, chickenpox, malaria, scarlet fever, influenza, syphilis and gangrene.

Echinacea's popularity waned by the Second World War. It experienced a revival from the 1950s to the 1980s as many studies, most of them German, concluded that the herbs has remarkable properties to stimulate the immune system and fight infections. By the 1990s the herb became well known as American researchers studied the herb and came to similar conclusions.

### Therapeutic Uses

Echinacea works on infections by stimulating the immune system, more specifically it stimulates the macrophages (white blood cells) to digest the bad

bacteria.

Not only that, but Echinacea

also energizes other white blood cells which are the natural killer cells and the T lymphocytes.

Echinacea contains echinacoside, a natural anti-biotic, to fights viruses, bacteria and fungi.

The herb also mimics interferon, the body's own virus-fighting compound.

In a 1999 report published in the Journal of Family Practice, Echinacea was given to people in eight double blind studies, which means neither the participants nor the researchers knew who was taking the herb and who was taking a placebo. Six of the studies showed a clear benefit, with Echinacea reducing recovery time by 50 per cent in the severity of symptoms and the number of days it took to recover.

### To Use:

Echinacea can be taken as a decoction or a tincture. A decoction can be made by using two teaspoons of the root boiled in a cup of water. Simmer for 15 minutes, then strain before drinking. Drink up to three cups a day.

Echinacea can also be taken in commercial products in capsules or tincture.

### Contraindications

The tincture can cause numbing of the tongue or a tingling sensation, which is harmless and goes away in 30 minutes.

Echinacea should only be used for short-term treatment of wounds or acute illnesses such as colds and flu. Pregnant or nursing women should not take the herb without consulting a doctor.

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# Lavender for Stress Relief

Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) has long been known for its calming properties to ease stress. Since ancient times, lavender has been used as a tranquilizer for people who are anxious, restless or emotionally troubled.

### Healing History

The herbalist Nicholas Culpeper prescribed lavender for ‘all the grief and pains of the head.’

In the 1920s the French fragrance chemist Rene-Maurice Gattefosse was working in his laboratory when he accidentally set off an explosion that burned his arm. The burning pain caused him to plunge his arm into the nearest cold liquid which was a bowl of lavender oil.

The oil gave him immediate relief from the pain and his burn healed much quicker than he thought. Since then he dedicated his life to studying the role of essential oils in healing and published the book *Aromatherapie* in 1928.

### Therapeutic Use

Lavender is often used as an essential oil and because it can be used ‘neat’ or directly on the skin, it is easy and handy to benefit from.

The scent of lavender alone can calm the body and ease stress.

Studies at the Smell and Taste Research Foundation in Chicago found that brain waves associated with relaxation increased with associated with scents like lavender.

In another study at the University of Miami, mothers of fussy, crying babies

bathed them in water with or without lavender-scented bath oil. The babies cried less in the lavender oil group and the mothers had less stress.

People with dementia often become quite agitated and difficult to control. British researchers at a nursing home where 15 severely demented and agitated people lived decided to release either water vapor or lavender oil into the room. When they were exposed to the lavender oil, more than 60% of the residents became calmer.

Lavender’s calming effects can help people with insomnia as well and is often used in lavender pillows or in lavender baths.

### To Use:

An infusion can be prepared by adding 1-3 teaspoons of lavender flowers to a cup of boiling water, steep for 10 minutes and strain. Drink up to 3 cups a day. Lavender flowers, a lavender infusion, tincture or oil can be added to the bath water.

Several drops of lavender oil can be added directly to the skin or blended into a commercial massage lotion at 10 drops of essential oil per ounce of lotion.

### Contraindications

Lavender oil should not be ingested. Generally lavender is considered safe with few side effects.



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# Maca for Better Sex

**Maca** (*Lepidium meyenii*) is also known as Peruvian ginseng as this turnip like tuber grows high in Andes at altitudes of 11,000 to 14,500 feet where few plants can survive.

### Healing History

Maca was used by the Incas 2,000 years ago, who fed the root to their livestock and cooked the tubers in water to make a sweet, aromatic porridge known as mazamorra.

Maca is known as the Peruvian ginseng as it is an adaptogen and helps balance hormones. The Incas believed that Maca boosted energy, improved resistance to disease, improved fertility, treated menstrual problems and menopausal complaints and enhanced sex.

### Therapeutic Uses

Supplement companies often market maca as a libido enhancer but is it true?

Maca can increase energy levels and improve hormone balance, both in men and women. Animal studies show maca significantly improves sperm production, copulation and impregnation.

In one study, Peruvian researchers gave adult men either a placebo or 3 grams of the herb every day. After 8 weeks, maca had no effect on male sex hormones, but it improved sexual desire.

A report in the Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy concludes that maca ‘evidence for a pro-sexual effect of maca is currently minimal, an effect on libido is plausible.’

Maca can improve hormone balance in pre-menopausal and menopausal women.

Australian researchers who gave women either a placebo or two grams of maca a day found that maca provided significant relief of hot flashes and night sweats after two months.

### To Use:

Maca can be taken in a variety of ways. One way is to use the powdered herb in smoothies. Another is to take it in capsule form and this is popular for people on the go.

### Contraindications

Maca is generally safe when recommended doses of 2 – 3 grams per day in divided doses are followed. As maca can have a laxative effect, some users have complained of stomach aches though this usually occurs when larger amounts have been taken.

Follow directions for commercial preparations. Maca should be taken in cycles with three weeks on and one week off.