



8 HEALING HERBS

Herbal medicine is now used to treat everything from water retention to thrush. But there is no need to buy expensive tinctures when effective cures are growing all around you...

WORDS TRACEY LATTIMORE

With one in five of us using complementary medicines on a regular basis and herbal remedies accounting for half of all sales of alternative products, it's likely you have a few tablets and tinctures stashed in your medicine cabinet. But do you know what works best and how to use it? We asked top herbalists to reveal the most effective remedies around* ...

STRESS

BEST REMEDY: LEMON BALM

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** Lemon balm (also known as melissa) is incredibly good for stress – it lifts the spirits and is a gentle antidepressant, according to Susan Curtis, director of medicine at Neal's Yard Remedies. It's also good for nervous indigestion, anxiety and sleep problems. Research also shows that lemon balm is good for boosting memory – a study at the University Of Northumbria found that daily supplementation with melissa improved both attention span and memory function.

→ **TRY THIS** Good 'N' Natural Lemon Balm capsules, £5.99 for 100, from Holland & Barrett (www.hollandandbarrett.com). Or make an infusion with four or five lemon balm leaves and drink up to three cups a day.

NAUSEA

BEST REMEDY: CAMOMILE

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** 'Camomile influences the digestive system and has an anti-spasmodic effect, making it good for relieving symptoms of tummy bugs, mild gastritis and mild IBS,' says Trudy Norris, herbalist and information officer for the National Institute Of Medical Herbalists. 'It's good for travel sickness, too.'

→ **TRY THIS** For nausea, try Clipper Organic Chamomile tea, 78p for 20 bags, from Tesco. Soaking a flannel with warm camomile tea and applying repeatedly to your abdomen for 20 minutes can help to relieve period pain.

THRUSH

BEST REMEDY: CALENDULA

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** Well known for relieving skin conditions, calendula (also known as marigold) has anti-fungal, anti-inflammatory and antiseptic properties, making it good for tackling acute thrush. It has also been found to reduce symptoms of dermatitis significantly. You can even drink the tea, three times a day, to help with irregular periods – its oestrogenic properties are thought to help regulate your menstrual cycle.

→ **TRY THIS** Norris advises the following for thrush: make two litres of strong calendula tea, pour into a washing-up bowl and sit in it for 20 minutes, twice a day. Calendula

cream is also soothing for inflamed skin – try Neal's Yard Organic Calendula Cream, £5 for 30ml (www.nealsyardremedies.com).

DETOXING

BEST REMEDY: MILK THISTLE

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** 'Milk thistle helps to rebuild the liver's cells – it's good to take if you've overindulged with food or alcohol,' says medical herbalist Kim-gileve Evans. There is plenty of evidence to back this up – in research on the effect of milk thistle on chronic alcoholic liver disease, four out of six studies reported significant improvement in liver function. It's a great herb to use during a detox, as it has antioxidant properties and supports your liver – the organ that works hardest to cleanse your body.

→ **TRY THIS** Take 1ml to 2ml Boots Milk Thistle Tincture, £5.99 for 50ml, in a small glass of warm water before you go out for the evening, or as soon as you get home.

PMS

BEST REMEDY: AGNUS CASTUS

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** A very gentle remedy, this is great for regulating and correcting female hormone imbalances. It's also known as chasteberry or vitex agnus castus, and is used for PMS, menopause, polycystic ovarian syndrome and endometriosis. A German clinical trial monitoring over 1,500 women with menstrual disorders found that taking agnus castus once a day on an empty stomach eliminated or alleviated PMS symptoms in 90% of patients. 'It's best to take this herb first thing in the morning as that's when your hormone levels are at their highest,' says Evans.

She recommends taking ten to 20 drops of tincture in warm water. → **TRY THIS** Neal's Yard Agnus Castus Tincture, £6 for 150ml. A standard dosage is 1ml to 5ml diluted in water, three times a day. →





WATER RETENTION

BEST REMEDY: NETTLE

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** Nettle is a great source of useful minerals, such as iron, calcium, magnesium and boron, and it's well known for enhancing kidney function. A mild diuretic, it boosts your circulation, which makes it good for treating water retention, while its cleansing properties help skin disorders.

→ **TRY THIS** 'The easiest way to use nettle is to go out and pick it yourself,' says Norris. 'Make a tea by steeping three to four leaves in a covered mug of hot water for up to five minutes; drink this three times a day.'

FATIGUE

BEST REMEDY: GINSENG

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** 'This is a lovely herb – it nudges your body into balance, gives you more energy and relieves stress and anxiety,' says Evans. 'Siberian ginseng is better for women, while traditional ginseng – also known as panax – is better for men.' It could also boost your libido. Research from Korea found that 60% of men taking ginseng reported an improvement in erectile function.

→ **TRY THIS** Take ten to 20 drops of the tincture in warm water three times a day – the last dose should be before your evening meal. Try Napier's Siberian Ginseng Tincture, £10.26 for 100ml (www.napiers.net).

INSOMNIA

BEST REMEDY: VALERIAN

→ **HOW DOES IT WORK?** 'This is one of the stronger herbs for calming a busy mind. It helps to ease anxiety, which means you'll drop off more easily,' says Evans. In placebo-controlled studies, insomnia sufferers taking valerian supplements were able to fall asleep more quickly, and woke up less often during the night.

→ **TRY THIS** You can take it throughout the day to help soothe your nervous system and calm your mind, or half an hour before you go to bed. Try Valerian Root Liquid Extract, £4.49 for 30ml, from Holland & Barrett.

Grow your own remedies

It's very easy to grow your own herbal medicines, and you don't even need a garden.

Herbs thrive in pots on your windowsill and require little attention, and you can use any leftovers in your cooking. Try these for starters...

SAGE This is well known for combating night sweats, especially those linked to the menopause. Drink a sage-tea infusion using four to five leaves each night before bed.

THYME This stimulates circulation, and it also has antimicrobial properties. It's

useful taken as a tea to relieve urinary infection, or can be rubbed onto your chest to help ease a chesty cold.

ROSEMARY An antiseptic, rosemary is also good for stimulating digestion and improving bad breath. Try it for soothing headaches, too – drink an infusion of the leaves, or squeeze them and rub the oil onto your temples.

MINT Both peppermint and spearmint grow quickly and easily. Peppermint is good for relieving indigestion – sip the tea after a meal. ☒