

Herbal Medicine

for Kidney Strength

Give these critical organs the care they deserve

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Chinese medical doctors call kidneys the "mother of all organs." And no wonder. Each kidney, about the size and shape of a fist, is half of a hard-working pair that constantly filters toxins from the blood, balances mineral electrolytes and regulates changes in blood volume.

Because the kidneys fulfill such important functions, it's important to keep them in good health. Treat infec-

tions of the lower urinary tract (bladder infections) immediately to prevent them from spreading to the kidneys. Kidney pain usually starts as a dull ache in the lower back (between the lowest rib and the pelvis) on either or one side, and may be accompanied by fever, chills, bloating, fluid retention (particularly around the eyes and ankles) and cloudy or bloody urine.

Kidney stones are another reason that a proper diagnosis should be made. Made up of accumulated minerals, particularly calcium, they can be extremely painful but also be quite easily removed by high-tech gadgets. Much can be said for preventing stone formation in the first place. In his excellent *Holistic Herbal*, David Hoffman gives a tea formula that can be taken once a day as a preventive by combining equal parts corn silk, gravel root, hydrangea and stone root.

Herbal Prevention

Corn silk (*Zea mays*) is a mucilaginous herb and it protects the membranes of the urinary tract and kidneys. Corn silk is simply the dried tassels at the end of a cob of corn. The best results are obtained from your own organically grown corn. It is worth the space to grow a little just to obtain this valuable, soothing medicine that is so helpful in easing irritation of the urinary tract and bringing about a faster resolution of an infection.

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Known as the queen of the meadow, gravel root (*Eupatorium purpureum*) is a widely distributed weed that likes marshy places. Joe Pye, was a North American native healer, who became so famous for curing typhus with this plant that the early settlers called it Joe Pye weed. Its Latin name is associated with an ancient king who used it for healing—Mithradates Eupator, king of Pontus, who lived in Greece more than 2,000 years ago. Eupatorium is an antilithic, meaning it prevents and reduces kidney stones. In fact, the *British Herbal Pharmacopoeia* lists its specific indication as discouraging the formation of kidney and bladder stones. If you purchase this herb, make sure to distinguish it from one with a slight difference in the spelling of its last name, *Eupatorium perfoliatum* (boneset), a completely different plant that is often used to induce sweating.

Hydrangea, the dried root of *Hydrangea arborescens*, is a native of the southern United States. It is a diuretic and antilithic and is suggested as a remedy for cystitis, urinary calculi (stones), prostatitis and enlarged prostate gland. In men, an inflamed prostate can be another source of infection for the kidneys.

Stone root (*Collinsonia canadensis*) is a perennial that grows in the central and eastern United States and Canada. It is recognized as an antilithic and is also indicated for urinary calculi. One to four grams of the dried root (per 250-millilitre cup of boiling water) can be made into a decoction (gently simmered for five to 10 minutes) and taken three times a day.

Urinary Tract

Gravel root can be combined with hydrangea and uva ursi (*Arcostaphylos uva ursi*) as a urinary tract disinfectant that in my own practice was always dependable. There are many other urinary tract disinfectants, including thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and elecampane (*Inula helenium*). Both are excreted through the kidneys, thus imparting their disinfectant activity.

My herb of choice has always been elecampane. This plant grows wild in Canada and can easily be cultivated. Its antibacterial properties are focused on the urinary tract and it is excreted through both the kidneys and the lungs. It works best when a herbalist makes a tincture extract using the fresh roots of two- or three-year-old plants. In order to get the tincture strong enough, however, the plant has to be macerated for six months to a year. Since elecampane was once used as an ingredient in candy (especially cough candies), it is not surprising to learn that pieces of the fresh root can be washed and chewed. That is why this plant is extremely valuable to have growing in the garden beside your house, especially because it is also an antiseptic and expectorant for the lungs.

If you believe you have kidney disease, it is inadvisable to practice self-help medicine. Seek the help of a qualified practitioner. You may have a chronic kidney infection that could benefit from some of the medicinal plants used by herbal practitioners. ■

Founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Herbalism, Keith Stelling was recently awarded life membership in the College of Practitioners of Phytotherapy (England). He is presently completing a book on herbal medicine.

For a referral to an herbalist, contact the Ontario Herbalists Association at 416-536-1509. Web site: <herbalists.on.ca>. The Canadian Association of Herbal Practitioners can be reached at 403-270-0936.

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