Herbal Clippings

PURE PASSION
Taking passionflower (Passiflora incarnata) resulted in less anxiety in patients when taken just before surgery. Preoperative anxiety is common, with up to 80% of patients taking antianxiety or hypnotic drugs beforehand. When given 90 minutes before surgery, the herb tablets (standardized to 1 mg. benzoflavone) worked significantly better than a placebo. The effects began within 10 minutes and peaked in 30 minutes without causing sedation. Several previous studies agree that passionflower relieves anxiety, but most previous studies have been with animals.

The Institute of Complementary Medicine at the University Hospital in Zurich, Switzerland did a 2-week study on two anxiety and depression. A group of 182 people were given a combination of passionflower, valerian root (Valeriana officinalis), and lemon balm (Melissa officinalis) or the same herbs with butterbur root (Petasites hybridus) [see Report, AHA 21:4] or a placebo. Both herbs worked better than a placebo, with the four-herbs combination the most effective. The herbs were declared efficient and safe for short-term treatment, with no serious side effects.


PINE AWAY ULCERS
A new herbal treatment from a small Australian biotech company prevents and cures stomach ulcers. Conifer Green Needle Complex is made from the needles of Scotch pine (Pinus sylvestris) and Norwegian spruce (Picea abies). The Pasteur Institute in St Petersburg, Russia found that, unlike antibiotic drugs, the herbs prevent the Helicobacter pylori bacteria that causes ulcers from developing. The Solagran product is undergoing approval as a drug for stomach ulcers in Russia and is already approved as a chronic liver disease drug. It was first developed in the late 1930s in Russia and is already approved as a chronic liver disease drug. It was first developed in the late 1930s in Russia and has been used in the traditional medicines of China, Arabia, and the Americas to treat cancer. A dandelion leaf extract decreased the growth of breast cancer cells, while the flower and root did not. However, the root did block invasion of breast cancer cells and the leaf stopped expansion of prostate cancer cells.


LIMP AWAY ULcers

THEORY OF THE FRINGE
The root bark of the fringe tree (Chionanthus virginicus) was used by Native Americans both externally and internally. Western herbal medicine focuses on using it to treat liver problems. Researchers analyzing it found variations in the amounts of its eight most active compounds (secoiridoids). Although about 40% weaker, the bark of the stem has very similar content to the root bark and can be an effective substitute, since harvesting the root usually kills the tree.


DANDY ANTICANCER REMEDY
New data suggests that dandelions (Taraxacum officinale) contain novel anticancer agents. A number of plants in the same genus have been used in the traditional medicines of China, Arabia, and the Americas to treat cancer. The dandelion leaf extract decreased the growth of breast cancer cells, while the flower and root did not. However, the root did block invasion of breast cancer cells and the leaf stopped expansion of prostate cancer cells.


HORSING AROUND
American ginseng (Panax quinquefolius) can benefit horses. The Equine Research Centre at the University of Guelph in Canada found that low doses given before an inoculation improved a horse’s antibody response. It made aneuphine herpes virus vaccination more effective. Horsetalk (New Zealand), January 1, 2008. Ginseng aids vaccination response in horses. by W Pearson. www.horsetalk.com.nz/news

VIOLETS HEAL
The University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia found that Chinese violets (Viola yedoensis) contain eight anti-viral compounds (cyclotide peptides) with anti-HIV activity and are also insecticides. The range of activities include disruption of cancer cell membranes. The peptides are found throughout the violet plant family (Violaceae) and also in the distantly different madder family (Rubiaceae), which also contains the Amazonian medicinal tree, sangre de grado (Croton lechleri).

GINSENG vs OBESITY
Ginseng has anti-obesity, weight loss, and anti-diabetic properties that seem to be related. In several studies, American ginseng (Panax quinquefolius) improved diabetes control by helping insulin resistance, production, and secretion, and also reducing risk factors such as high cholesterol and blood pressure. It was shown to increase secretion through the digestive tract. It reduced cell death in pancreas beta-cells. It also seems to improve viability of cells among pancreatic islet cells by slowing their destruction and altering the function of their mitochondria in a positive way. Clinical studies show it can balance low blood sugar levels in type II diabetics.

Researchers found that Korean red ginseng extract (Panax ginseng) stimulated insulin on its own, without going through sugar mechanism channels. The primary compound in red ginseng (ginsenoside Rg3) inhibits activity of fat storage cells, reducing their ability to store fat. This may be a way that ginseng increases energy levels. It also normalized blood factors (hypothalamic neuropeptides) related to weight control. In another study, ginseng did not regulate sugar in healthy volunteers even though it did so in diabetics in previous studies. This suggests to researchers that it may only work when needed.


GOLDENSEAL
Goldenseal (Hydrastis canadensis) and its common substitute, barberry (Berberis amurensis), treat skin and eye problems. A National Institutes of Health study suggests not exposing eyes to bright sunlight after using either herb for eye-wash because the pure alkaloid berberine, and to a lesser degree, palmatine, can be phototoxic. They damaged surface cells of the human lens when it was then exposed to ultraviolet light. There was no damage to the cell’s DNA or the retina’s epithelial pigment cells. There were no problems with goldenseal’s hydrastine, canadine, or hydrastinine alkaloids. Ingesting the alkaloids was considered unlikely to cause eye cells. There were no problems with goldenseal’s hydrastines. They damaged surface cells of the human lens when it was then exposed to ultraviolet light. There was no damage to the cell’s DNA or the retina’s epithelial pigment cells. There were no problems with goldenseal’s hydrastine, canadine, or hydrastinine alkaloids. Ingesting the alkaloids was considered unlikely to cause eye toxicity. [Ed. note: A goldenseal infusion may not be a problem since it contains very little berberine (about 1 mm). It is an interesting side note that researchers found more than 10 times as much berberine in a goldenseal tincture than in the infusion.]


INHIBITING CANCER
The compound actein (a triterpene glycoside) from black cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa) may be useful to prevent and treat breast cancer. Black cohosh is popular for treating menopausal symptoms, but concerns had been raised about women with breast cancer taking it after a study reported it might either increase or decrease the cell-killing activity of chemotherapy drugs. Now, though, black cohosh has been found to have anti-estrogenic properties that slow the progression of cancer in human breast tissue. It stresses cancer cells, leading to their destruction and is also antioxidant. When researchers surveyed over 2,500 women, including nearly one-thousand women who had breast cancer, black cohosh decreased the chances of developing cancer by over 60%. Actein activates genes that help cells withstand stress, such as DNA damage and protein responses.


ET TU, DIGITALIS!
Structurally similar to actein in black cohosh, high doses of the digitoxin compound in foxglove (Digitalis purpurea) has even more protective effects against breast cancer development, especially in inhibiting cell growth. (Small amounts actually promoted cancer cells.) A number of other cardiac glycosides also have this ability. The two compounds work synergistic together, causing Columbia University researchers to suggest that they may help in cancer prevention and decreasing the amount of chemotherapy drugs.


ETTU, DIGITALIS!

BETTER LIVER, LESS DRUGS
An interaction between the herbal product Movina, which contains St. John’s wort (Hypericum perforatum), and the cholesterol-lowering drug atorvastatin may reduce the drug’s effectiveness. When a crossover study at Sahlgrenska University Hospital in Sweden gave Movina twice daily for a month to 16 people who were on medication for high cholesterol, their LDL cholesterol levels increased more than in controls taking a multivitamin. Although the herbal product produced no side effects, it appeared to clear the drug from the liver faster.
