Herbs to Keep You Moving

CoreyPine Shane helps you get off the couch and stay warm this winter.

Winter time: the cold and the wind, the early dark, the occasional snow. It's so much easier to stay curled up on the couch than to bundle up and go outdoors. And, sitting leads to more sitting. But, when you do get up and get out, you find yourself feeling more clear-headed, more active, more alert and better about yourself.

After all, humans are designed to move, and our health depends on it. Moving our bodies moves food through our digestive system, moves lymph and blood through our vessels, and helps keep arthritis and osteoporosis at bay. But these days, we sit for longer than ever—in cars, facing computers, in front of TVs: for work, play and travel.

Whether we have a hard time getting started or problems with physical movement, there are many herbs that can help us move our bodies with more grace and ease. The three main areas where herbs can help are by stimulating circulation, by nourishing our joints and connective tissue, and by easing inflammation.

Often the best herbs for the wintertime are the ones that warm us up by getting our blood flowing better. These same herbs are often used to treat arthritis as well, which is traditionally thought of as a stagnation of energy. The area around the joints is narrow, and blood has a hard time reaching these spaces. This lack of blood flow is a major cause of problems in this area.

For most people, ginger is the first warming herb that comes to mind. Especially good for people who are chronically cold or have a hard time getting started in winter, ginger can be used in any form to improve circulation throughout the body and reduce inflammation, as well as to improve sluggish digestion. Ginger tea is especially warming.

Turmeric is a close relative of ginger that gives curry powder its yellow color. Though not as warming as ginger, it's one of my favorite anti-inflammatory herbs for joint problems as well as for any physical trauma. It works by increasing blood flow in inflamed areas to bring in fresh blood and remove toxic waste products. Sassafrass has a long tradition of use for arthritis conditions. A local relative of cinnamon, it helps to move and cleanse the blood. When used as a tea, it has none of the safrrole content that makes the essential oil carcinogenic. And best of all, it tastes like root beer!

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Herbs can also help heal the joints, ligaments and tendons. The following nurturing and moistening herbs can be especially useful for dry, creaky joints or after an injury. Solomon's Seal is a local woodland herb especially good for creaky joints because of its soothing and moistening nature. It also helps heal injuries to the tendons, ligaments and joints, and is great for tendinitis.

Gotu kola is another herb to heal connective tissue. Though primarily known in this country as a brain tonic, it is used in Ayurvedic medicine to help heal skin inflammation and arthritis. It's also an excellent herb for those practicing yoga or meditation, as it can calm and focus the mind.

For healing from any kind of injury, a good first herb to turn to is comfrey, in tea form. Comfrey is the number one herb for growth of new tissue after damage and speeds up the healing process. Because of potential liver concerns, it should only be used short-term and avoided completely by anyone with a history of liver problems.

All of these herbs can help heal and regenerate tissue after damage, but there are other herbs better at stopping acute pain and inflammation, including turmeric as already mentioned. Several herbs contain salicylic acid, the main ingredient in aspirin. These include willow bark and meadowsweet; both are excellent for many kinds of pain. While aspirin and other over-the-counter anti-inflammatories are known to cause ulcers and other stomach problems, meadowsweet has traditionally been used to treat these same problems.

Black cohosh, often thought of as a "women's herb" because of its use for menopause and menstrual cramps, is also an excellent muscle relaxer and anti-inflammatory for joints. It can be used for stiff muscles, whiplash, rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia. This is a powerful herb that shouldn't be overlooked.

Finally, looking at diet choices can be helpful. Some people find that eating nightshades like potatoes, tomatoes and eggplants can cause negative reactions, including stiffness in the joints. In strict macrobiotics, nightshades are completely avoided.

In some cases, eating less meat can also be helpful. Excess protein consumption can create acidic byproducts that then settle in the joints. Red meat in particular also has high levels of a fatty acid called arachidonic acid that promotes inflammation. Fish, however, can be helpful because of beneficial fatty acids, also known as essential fatty acids or "EFAs." You can think of EFAs as "greasing the wheels" for better flexibility and movement. (See "Seafood: To Eat or Not to Eat" on p. 44 for more information.)

So, let these foods and herbs help winter from weighing you down. Drink a cup of hot tea and get a move on!

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