Traditional Medicine

Succulcap (Scutellaria lateriflora)

by Paul Bergner

More than a hundred species of succulcap (Scutellaria spp.) grow throughout the world. North American varieties were used by such native American tribes as the Penobscot, Iroquois, and Cherokee and by early European colonists for a variety of purposes. Several species grow in Britain, but do not appear in the classic British herbalists of Culpepper and Gerard. Scutellaria lateriflora was used by all schools of North American medicine during the 1800s, has been in common use by herbalists in Great Britain from that time up to the present day. The plant is still used in rural folk medicine in the Appalachians, and is one of the most commonly used agents by contemporary medical herbalists in the U.S. and Britain. It was official in the U.S. Pharmacopoeia from 1860-1900.

Succulcap is useful for a general pattern of nervous exhaustion, from a variety of causes. When this condition is advanced, there is nervous depression with nervous agitation, restlessness, insomnia, and musculoskeletal tension and agitation. A more extreme pattern may include neuralgia, sciatica, tremors, and seizures. Succulcap has been used by physicians for such severe conditions as rabies and delirium tremens. Succulcap is not appropriate for acute or sub acute inflammatory conditions of the nervous system. Its particular pattern may underlie conditions of various organ systems, but if the pattern is remembered, then the application to specific conditions will be appropriate. The nervous exhaustion may result from acute or chronic disease, fevers, severe chronic cough, chronic poor digestion, acute or chronic reproductive complaints, overwork, teething in infants, caffeine abuse, episodes of mania or other mental illness, drug addiction or alcoholism, chronic sleep debt, overwhelming life events, chronic trauma and post traumatic stress disorder. The clinical presentation may include, besides fatigue, depression, nervous tension, and musculoskeletal agitation, a weak, tense pulse, palpitations or irregular heart beat, with tension headache or temporomandibular joint syndrome.

Succulcap has been classified as a nerving tonic and antispasmodic and used in that manner continuously since early in the 1800s. It appears to act on the central nervous system to build and restore its tone, and paradoxically to allow relaxation and rest. This apparent contradiction—tonifying while relaxing—is the unique characteristic of succulcap, and the reason for its high esteem in North American medicine for more than 200 years. It is also mildly bitter and possesses the properties common to other bitter tonics with less tendency to overstimulate than agents such as gentian or hydastis. It is sedative but does not leave a hangover the way valerian does in some doses for some patients. Due to volatile compounds, if the plant material is reasonably fresh and not overly heated during preparation, it possesses very mild diaphoretic and emmenagogue properties. Results may vary from patient to patient but generally succulcap does not possess strong hypnotic properties, and will not induce sleepiness during normal activities during the day. The most important exception is in the patient with chronic sleep debt, in whom succulcap may relax the system sufficiently that the normal urge to sleep is restored.

- For general nervousness combine with other nerving tonics such as tincture of milky oats.
- For chronic stress combine with herbs such as pulsatilla and vervain.

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The Maker, in benevolence, has bestowed compound properties on by for the greater number of the agents placed at our disposal. Only a moderate number can be said to possess one property only. . . . In very many instances, one property is so predominant that the agent is valued chiefly for it, though possessing other properties . . . Taking in the vast number of our true remedies, considering the wide range of properties they occupy in this scale, and further remembering the diversity of organs on which they act and the diversity of times occupied in their action, and the mind will at once be astonished at the surprising sum of powers that have been provided for the relief of human suffering.

Wm Cook 1869
Historical combinations with Scullcap

**Actions:** bitter, nervine, tonic, antispasmodic, hypnotic

**Nervine tonic**

**Scutellaria, Avena**
- For neurasthenia and neuroses: Priest
- Tonic nerve: BHP
- Add Turnera, Cola, and/or Humulus for nervous disorders: BHP
- Add Verbena, with Cypripedio for depressive states: BHP

**Scutellaria-Turnera**
- Tonic nerve: Priest
- Add verbena hastata, nervine tonic with weak stomach: Shook

**Insomnia**

**Scutellaria-Passiflora**
- For insomnia: Cook
- Passiflora 15-40 drops; Scutellaria 2-12 drops for insomnia, exhaustion; alcohol hangover: Clymer
- Add Humulus, Lactuca: BHP

**Scutellaria-Valeriana**
- Scutellaria 2; Valeriana 1: Bergner

**Nervine antispasmodic**

**Scutellaria-Valeriana**
- Insomnia, antispasmodic: Bergner
- Add Pedicularis for tension headache with TMJ: Bergner
- Add Viscum for hysteria: BHP

**Anxiety**

**Scutellaria-Turnera**
- For anxiety neurosis: Priest
- Add Verbena hastata, nervine tonic with weak stomach: Shook

**Neurological**

**Scutellaria-Stachys betonica**
- For nervous headache: BHP
- Add Cimicifuga for rheumatism or chronic sciatica: Priest
- Scutellaria 1 oz.; Stachys elix 1.5 oz
- Cimicifuga 1.5 oz; Helonias 1 oz; for sciatica; 1 tsp per 2-3 hours with hot sponge bath to affected parts: Lyle

**Scutellaria, Anemone, Cimicifuga**
- For convulsions: Cook
- For chorea, hysteria, agitation, epleptiform seizures: Priest

**Cough, fever, respiratory infection**

**Scutellaria-Asclepias tuberosa**
- Scutellaria 2-20 drops, Asclepias 15-40 drops per hour, for pneumonia, acute pleurisy: Clymer
- Add Capsicum for influenza, colds, fever; chills predominant: Clymer
- Add Lobelia for influenza, colds, fever; if relaxant effect is needed: Clymer
- Scutellaria 2-15, Asclepias 20-45, Marrubium 5-40 drops for deep seated colds and cough with expectoration: Clymer
- Scutellaria 12-15 drops, Asclepias tub 20-40 drops; Eupatorium perf 15-30 drops for influenza, colds, fever, pleurisy: Clymer

**Female, Pregnancy**

**Scutellaria, Caulophyllum**
- Restlessness during pregnancy: Priest
- Scutellaria, Caulophyllum 2.
- Dioscorea 3; for convulsions, after-pains, nervousness during parturition: Lyle
- Scutellaria 1, Caulophyllum 2, Dioscorea 3; Lobelia (a little) for rigid os uteri: Lyle

Sources: The Physiomedical Dispensatory, Wm Cook, 1869; Physiomedical Therapeutics, Materia Medica, and Pharmacy, by T.J. Lyle, 1897; Nature's Healing Agents, RS Clymer, 1908; Advanced Treatise in Herbolology, E. Shook; Herbal Medication, Priest and Priest, 1982; British Herbal Pharmacopoeia, 1983

The admixture of remedies should not be left to crude accident, but should be made a question of close scientific investigation; for the value of numerous articles can be greatly enhanced by giving them in suitable company.

Wm Cook 1869
• For **chronic insomnia**, combine with hypnotic-nervines and increase the dose approaching bedtime. Formula: scullcap, blue vervain, hops, and chamomile, with one half part of valerian.

• Take alone and with appropriate carminatives or demulcents for **nervous dyspepsia**.

• Combine with musculoskeletal remedies such as black cohosh, peony, kava, and/or pedicularis for **antispasmodic** effects.

• Combine with anodynes such as willow bark, California poppy, and wild lettuce, for exhaustion and insomnia accompanying **chronic pain**.

• Combine with relaxant expectorants such as wild cherry bark, pleurisy root, and lobelia for the exhaustion of **persistent acute cough**.

• Scullcap may help to relieve the restlessness and insomnia in **fever**. In the later stages of the fever, combine with relaxant diaphoretics such as asclepias, *Eupatorium perfoliatum*, or elder.

• For **fever in children**, combine with combination catnip and/or elder flower.

• For **convalescence from fevers** take alone or with stronger tonics.

• For **intermittent fevers**, combine with boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*).

• For **teething in infants** combine with catnip.

• For **spasmodic uterine complaints** with general weakness and tendency to amenorrhea, combine with appropriate female system herbs.

• For **opium or alcohol withdrawal**, give larger doses of a strong infusion every two hours.

• For **tension headache** arising from chronic pain or coughing, use relaxants such as asclepias, pedicularis, kava, and/or peony.

• Scullcap has traditionally been used for **seizure disorder**, from a variety of causes, but traditional literature warns that it is fully effective or curative.

• The use of scullcap in **hydrophobia** was first commended by a Dr. Vandesveer in 1772, and medical botanist Constantine Rafinesque reported on a large number of cured cases in 1830. The Eclectic John Uri Lloyd later documented cured cases and called for further formal research but the plant has not been formally studied for hydrophobia in either humans or animals.

### Preparations

Traditional literature generally recommends a strong infusion (one ounce of good quality herbs per pint of water). William Cook (1868) warns that boiling destroys the medicinal properties of scullcap, and Scudder (1870) cautions that fresh or recently dried herbs should be used. As late as the 1920's The Eclectic Finley Ellingwood stated: "Its specific nerve sedative properties were those observed by the older writers who obtained this influence from a strong infusion which without doubt will yield results not obtained from small doses of the finer pharmaceutical preparations." The dose is about 4 ounces of the above infusion. The dose of the powder in the 1900 U.S.P. was 1 gram.

The accompanying table (page 16) gives some historical combinations in the Physiomedicalist tradition of herbalism.

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