

# Herbal Antibiotic Alternatives

Written by Ceara Foley

Friday, 01 September 2006 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 March 2014 13:17

Humans exist in symbiosis with bacteria living all around and inside us. Children migrate towards bacteria. They are inherently fond of the same things bacteria treasure—things like bread, cheese, soil, and sticky fingers. Occasionally eating bacteria boosts a child's acquired immunity. Antibiotics have been rightfully deemed "miracle drugs" because of the countless lives they have saved from potentially lethal infections such as meningitis. Yet, the word "antibiotic" means "against life." These powerful drugs kill bacteria in the body. Our society has initiated a foolhardy war on bacteria, forgetting that bacteria support life more regularly than they do harm.



WELLNESS LIFESTYLE

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Hundreds of beneficial types of bacteria live in our bodies, helping to protect against the harmful ones. While antibiotics are effective in killing bad bacteria, they also kill the good bacteria—an important part of the immune system—that line the digestive, respiratory, and urinary tracts. Without protection from friendly bacteria, disease-causing agents take hold more readily.

Antibiotic use often causes an overgrowth of yeast, as seen in babies that present with thrush after treatment. Yeast overgrowth further weakens the immune system. The prophylactic prescription of antibiotics is a major contributing factor to chronic health conditions. David Bell, Antimicrobial Resistance Coordinator for the Centers for Disease Control, clarifies one reason for this: "The overuse of antibiotics is the driving force for bacteria to become resistant." Antibiotic resistance occurs when an antibiotic is effective in killing some of the bacteria, but the surviving bacteria multiply and mutate to become resistant to the antibiotic should they meet it again.

Antibiotic use can also lead non-disease-causing bacteria to mutate into more pernicious, disease-causing strains. Often, a vicious cycle is created: taking antibiotics and breeding new and more resistant strains of bacteria while the immune system becomes increasingly degraded. Drug-resistant bacterial infections affect nearly two million Americans. "If you've had antibiotics recently, you are three to nine times more likely to have a resistant infection than someone who has not had an antibiotic," Bell explains. Yet, US doctors prescribe around twice as many antibiotics as English doctors and four times as many as doctors in Germany, often for ailments such as the common cold or a sore throat.

Antibiotics are ineffective in killing viruses. Still, in 1990, American doctors wrote twelve million antibiotic prescriptions for respiratory infections, a category of illnesses usually caused by viruses. A staggering ninety percent of all antibiotics prescribed in the United States are either prescribed inappropriately or used inappropriately by the patients. This overuse is largely due to the American desire for quick results that ensure our daily routine is interrupted as little as possible. Antibiotics are strong and operate fast. This "quick fix" mentality is especially harmful to our children. Some day care centers have seen the number of children infected with penicillin-resistant strep as high as twenty-nine percent. Over prescription occurs most often between 1 and 4 years of age, when ear infections are common.

Herbal treatments are very effective in treating bacterial and other common childhood infections. (Please consult an herbalist for age- and condition-appropriate dosing.) Several herbs such as garlic, goldenseal, myrrh, onions, and oregano have antibiotic effects. The difference between an antibiotic drug and an antibiotic herb is that the drug is an isolated constituent limited to the power of that one chemical, whereas the herb contains several constituents with a variety of healing properties, producing a synergistic effect. The herb can actually kill only the bad bacteria while not harming the good; the drug does not have the wisdom to differentiate. Furthermore, most bacteria are not fooled by an isolated compound, often the drug



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Care for your child first by using prevention. I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who eloquently conveyed, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Herbs are wonderful allies for boosting the immune system. Focus on boosting your child's immunity before they go back to school, one place where contagions are readily spread. **Fresh garlic** is an antibiotic, antibacterial, and antifungal immune stimulant. Add it to foods to prevent illness. Lemonade made with **garlic, ginger,** and **honey**

nips colds, flu, and respiratory ailments in the bud before they have a chance to become infectious. Oddly, this drink is so yummy that most children will fake an illness to get it!

Immune-boosting herbs that make tasty additions to soups are

**astragalus**

,  
**codonopsis**

,  
**burdock root**

,  
**nettles**

,  
**medicinal mushrooms**

, and  
**seaweeds**

. It is increasingly important to incorporate these healing foods into the child's diet during the change of seasons, when the immune system is most vulnerable.

**Garlic** and **mullein flower oil** are soothing and, along with omission of dairy, wheat, and sugar, an effective treatment for ear infections, whereas inappropriate antibiotic use may perpetuate the problem instead of solving it. See a doctor if your child's temperature is over 103°F, ear discharge presents, or the pain lasts for over an hour.

**Calendula tea** is one of my favorite initial remedies for almost anything a child contracts. Make a tea for eczema, allergies, chronic respiratory infection, colds, flus, fevers, or coughs.

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Calendula tea alone, or with **myrrh**, can be used as a gargle for gum, mouth, and throat infections. Myrrh is especially beneficial for mucus membranes and stimulates white blood cell production. Use calendula in combination with the immune stimulant

### **Echinacea**

for tonsillitis. If swollen glands are present, add a lymphatic cleanser such as cleavers.

When your child gets a skin injury, try herbs instead of antibiotic ointment. **Calendula** is an extremely effective, yet gentle, herb. It is an anti-inflammatory, antifungal, antiseptic wound healer that induces detoxification through sweating and stimulation of the lymph. Calendula has been proven effective against staphylococcus bacteria, which is responsible for causing skin infections and has become resistant to many antibiotics. Use a tea or diluted alcohol extract to cleanse the wound first. Then use a salve made from calendula-infused oil to inhibit infection and inflammation and promote the growth of new skin.

Another versatile antibiotic herb to include in a salve is **usnea**. The unique blend of antibiotic chemicals in this lichen protects the plant from microorganisms. It affects humans the same way. Used topically, usnea will kill germs, fungus, and molds and internally it will fight conditions such as bronchitis and urinary tract infections. Usnic acid is effective against streptococcus, staphylococcus, and bacteria that cause pneumonia.

**Honey** is another miraculous wound healing enhancer that is exceptional in its treatment for burns. Honey will keep the wound or burn moist which aids tissue regeneration and inhibits scarring. While moisture provides an excellent environment for bacteria to thrive, the natural hydrogen peroxide present in honey makes it a powerful antibacterial. My two-year-old daughter is sometimes wary of salve, but is always excited to have honey applied to a boo-boo.

Antibiotics are abundantly (and often mistakenly) prescribed for children with fevers. Fevers are a symptom of an underlying invasion in the body. The fever results in an effort to burn the antigen to its demise. Fevers under 102° F should be allowed to run their course for at least 24 hours, providing that your child is taking fluids well and not excessively out-of-sorts. Support the fever in doing its job more efficiently with “febrifuge” herbs and diaphoretics. My favorites for children are **yarrow**, which is also antiseptic; **catnip**, which aids the child in getting some sleep;

### **lemon balm**

, an antidepressant antiviral; and

### **elder**

, a magical mothering plant that enhances immunity especially where allergies are present.

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When using an herbal therapy, improvement should occur in your child within 24–48 hours; with continued treatment, the infection should clear up within 7–10 days. If symptoms persist, please consult a physician. If antibiotic treatment is necessary, make sure to support the body through this intense therapy. Follow-up with **probiotics** that restore healthy gut flora. Plain live yogurt is an ideal source of **acidophilus** and **bifidus**, but supplements are available as well.

### **Inulin**

is a probiotic found in the roots of dandelion and burdock. These versatile healing roots will also aid the liver, kidneys, and urinary system in their effort to cleanse the antibiotic pharmaceutical from the body, as will the use of aforementioned diaphoretics that aid the body in sweating.

Increase your child's vitamin C consumption. Leafy greens are a great source, as are **rose hips**

,  
**hibiscus**

, and

**violet flower**

teas, all of which children will enjoy drinking and helping to prepare.

Make sure to involve your child in her or his treatment. As with any relationship between living things, plant medicines work better when there is respect and friendship present. Explain to children the amazing work their bodies do to keep them well and encourage their convalescence. Whether using pharmaceuticals or herbal treatments, be sure to have your child rest for at least two days after all symptoms have subsided. Illness is a way the spirit works through the body to remind us to take time off from work and school to care for our loved ones and ourselves. It is truly a gift that demands that we integrate nurturance into our busy schedules.

