

# Herbal Remedies and COVID-19: What to Know



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We talked to experts about using herbal remedies amid a pandemic. Getty Images

- Herbal remedies have long been used to treat infections and viruses, such as the common cold, influenza, fever, and even herpes.
- But one of the biggest problems with using these herbs in the U.S. is that many herbal and natural remedies are low quality.
- Certain herbs, if misused, could boost the immune system even more and lead to “a cytokine storm.”

As scientists around the world race toward finding an effective treatment and cure for COVID-19, health officials in China have started encouraging an alternative type of medicine to help those who get sick with the respiratory infection — traditional herbal remedies.

Using herbs for illness isn't a novel idea. For thousands of years, herbs like licorice, ginger, and ephedra have been used to treat respiratory infections like the flu

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and pneumonia.

Some remedies, like forsythia, were put to the test for SARS

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and found to be somewhat effective in laboratory studies.

Anecdotal, people have claimed herbal medicines have kept them healthy or improved their symptoms, but the bulk of research on herbs is inconclusive. Health experts warn that we don't have enough data to support the use of herbal remedies for COVID-19.

Though we may eventually find that certain herbs may be beneficial for the coronavirus, the science is scarce and now is not the time to start experimenting with herbal remedies on your own if you contract COVID-19.

“Everything has to be taken with an understanding that we don’t have any data with the coronavirus,” Dr. Felicia Gersh, the founder and director of the Integrative Medical Group of Irvine in Irvine, California, told [name removed]. “Who knows what the future may bring.”

## Herbs may help with other viruses

Herbal remedies have long been used to treat infections and viruses, such as the common cold

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, influenza

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, fever, and even herpes

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Some are thought to enhance the immune system and put the body in a healthier position to fight infections. Others are believed to be powerful antivirals that block certain viruses from replicating in the body.

But just because we've seen some promise with other illnesses does not mean people should assume herbal remedies provide the same benefit with COVID-19.

Every virus is unique in its structure and behavior. The herbs that seem to work for other viral infections will need to be tested to see if they also hold up against COVID-19.

"This one's a little bit more of a dangerous virus," said Jeffrey Langland, PhD, an assistant research professor at Arizona State University's Biodesign Center for Immunotherapy, Vaccines and Virotherapy and associate professor of medical microbiology at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine in Tempe.

## **There isn't enough data on herbs and COVID-19**

Historically, there's been a major lack of evidence surrounding natural medicines.

For one, it's been difficult to secure the necessary funding to study the health effects of plants and herbs. The United States is a very pharmaceutical-driven society, so that's where the priority has historically been.

Research has also been somewhat inconsistent. There are so many parts of a plant — the root, stem, leaf, flower — and it's hard to get studies that consistently analyze the same portion of a plant.

Langland has been leading up a team of researchers who have been studying if and how certain herbs could potentially be used to treat COVID-19.

His team is testing over 30 herbs, and looking at each plant's antiviral and immune-supportive properties.

Langland is hopeful they'll find a treatment, but says it will take time to get the results and put the science behind botanicals.

"Even for those herbs we find effective, we want to go through and make sure we look at any sort of toxicity, and sort of side effects that may be associated with them, look at quality of extracts, and start to move that forward," Langland said.

"We're not going to jump and throw this out there for people to start using without regarding things like safety," Langland added. "Just like any pharmaceutical, we cannot rush this."

# There could be unwanted side effects

Just like any other medicine, herbal remedies could cause adverse side effects.

Take licorice, one of the remedies that officials in China have recommended for COVID-19.

According to Gersh, licorice is thought to be an effective treatment for herpes viruses

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Licorice paste, when applied to a herpes sore, can prevent the virus from replicating and stop it in its tracks, says Gersh. But it also has a major downside.

“It can activate a hormone in the body called aldosterone which causes fluids retention and can actually induce hypertension,” Gersh said.

Because hypertension is a huge risk factor for COVID-19 complications, Gersh said she “would be concerned about using licorice, especially in high quantities, in someone with coronavirus.”

St Johns wort is a widely available supplement but it can cause issues if a person is on medication.

“It can interact with other medications that a patient’s on and block their absorption in the body and prevent them from acting,” Langland said.

Furthermore, some people’s immune systems are overreacting to COVID-19, triggering widespread inflammation that can be even more problematic than the infection itself.

Certain herbs, if misused, could boost the immune system even more and lead to “a cytokine storm,” or a fatal overactive immune response, according to Gersh.

One of the biggest problems, according to Langland, is that many herbal and natural remedies are low quality.

“There is so much herbal medicine that is adulterated, which means the product you’re buying has been spiked with other botanicals or doesn’t contain any of the botanicals that are labeled on the bottle,” Langland said.

If you are getting the product from a local health store, there's a good chance you aren't getting a high quality product, he added.

"You can't assume every herb is safe. It may have some properties that could be potentially harmful," Gersh said.

## **Don't experiment with herbal remedies if you have COVID-19**

If you are considering trying herbal remedies for COVID-19, keep in mind that we don't fully understand the risks and benefits.

How a botanical works in one person's body may be drastically different from how it behaves in another, depending on their health, age, and symptoms.

"With botanicals, you want to treat people individually," Langland said, noting how the type of herb and dosage would likely vary from person to person.

If people are curious about herbal remedies, it's best to consult a physician or naturopathic doctor who is well versed in various herbs and their properties.



“I wouldn’t advocate that people willy-nilly start taking all kinds of herbal products and not have a clue what’s in it,” Gersh said.

You want to have data, and be aware of any potential side effects before you take herbal products for an infection as potentially life threatening as COVID-19.

## **The bottom line**

Health officials in China are recommending traditional herbal remedies for COVID-19, but many experts warn that we don’t have enough data on COVID-19 to understand how different herbs may affect people’s health.

Though herbal remedies may seem harmless, if misused, they could increase a person’s risk for COVID-19. We may find that certain herbs are effective in preventing and treating COVID-19 in some people, but there currently isn’t enough data regarding the use of herbal remedies for the new coronavirus.