Herbs to Help Anxiety – other than Kava

Anxiety describes any feelings of worry or dread, usually about potential events that might happen. Some anxiety about stressful events is normal. However, in some people, anxiety interferes with the ability to function. Severe anxiety usually lasts more than six months, though it may not be a problem every day. Physical symptoms can sometimes result, including fatigue, insomnia, and irritability. Some people who think they are anxious may actually be depressed. Because of all these factors, it is important for people who are anxious to seek expert medical care. Natural therapies can be one part of the approach to helping relieve mild to moderate anxiety.

An old folk remedy for anxiety, particularly when it causes insomnia, is chamomile tea. There is evidence from test tube studies that chamomile contains compounds with a calming action.\(^1\) There are also animal studies that suggest a benefit from chamomile for anxiety,\(^2\) but no human studies support this belief. Often one cup of tea is taken three or more times per day.

St. John’s wort is very popular for the treatment of mild depression. It has also been reported in one double-blind study to reduce anxiety.\(^3\)

A number of other botanicals known as “nerve tonics” are also used in traditional herbal medicine with anxious people. These have not been rigorously investigated by scientific means to confirm their efficacy, although they have a long track record of safety. These include oats (oat straw), hops, passion flower, scullcap, valerian, hyssop, and linden. A German study has found the combination of valerian and passion flower to be useful for anxiety.\(^4\) Refer to detailed references for more information on the individual herbs. Below is a brief overview of a few of the most commonly used.

- **Oats**: In folk medicine, as well as among current herbalists, oats are used to treat nervous exhaustion, insomnia, and “weakness of the nerves.” Oats can be eaten as a morning breakfast cereal. A tea can be made from a heaping tablespoonful of oats brewed with 1 cup of boiling water; after cooling and straining, the tea can be drunk several times a day.\(^5\) It can also be taken as a tincture or in capsule or tablet form. Follow the directions on the bottle. A soothing bath to ease irritated skin can be made by running bath water through a sock containing several tablespoons of oats.

- **Hops**: Hops have been shown to have mild sedative properties. The German Commission E monograph recommends 500 mg for anxiety.\(^5\) This can be repeated three to four times daily. The dried fruits can be made into a tea by pouring one half to 1 cup of boiling water over 1–2 U.S. teaspoons of the fruit. Steep for ten to fifteen minutes before drinking. It can also be taken as a tincture or in capsule or tablet form. Follow the directions on the bottle. Many herbal preparations use hops in combination with herbal sedatives, including valerian, passion flower, and scullcap.

- **Passion Flower**: The effects of passion flower are believed to be primarily on the nervous system, particularly for anxiety due to mental worry and overwork.\(^6\) The recommended intake of the dried herb is 4–8 grams three times per day.\(^7\) To make a tea, 0.5 to 2.5 grams of the herb can be steeped with boiling water for ten to fifteen minutes and drunk two to three times per day. It can also be taken as a tincture or in capsule or tablet form. Follow the directions on the bottle.
• **Scullcap:** As is the case in modern herbal medicine, scullcap was used historically as a sedative for persons with nervous tension and insomnia. Scullcap tea can be made by pouring 1 cup of boiling water over 1–2 U.S. teaspoons of the dried herb and steeping for 10 to 15 minutes; this tea may be drunk three times per day. However, the dry plant may be less effective than the fresh plant. As a result, tincture made from fresh scullcap is generally preferred. Follow the directions on the bottle.

### Other Things to Consider

**Poor dietary habits can trigger or aggravate anxiety.** For example, eating a meal high in simple carbohydrates (e.g. refined sugar or white flour) can cause blood sugar levels to soar, then plummet. Missing a meal also leads to low blood sugar. And when sugar levels drop, epinephrine (adrenaline) rises. The result is lightheadedness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and jitteriness. For people vulnerable to attacks of low blood sugar, small, frequent meals can help. Consuming protein and fat in every meal will also help stabilize blood sugar.

**Other Nutritional Factors:** There are at least six nutritional factors that may trigger anxiety, they include alcohol, caffeine, sugar, deficiency of the B vitamins (niacin, pyridoxine, and thiamin), deficiency in calcium or magnesium, and food allergies.

- **Caffeine:** People with high levels of anxiety appear to be more susceptible to the actions of caffeine. Too much caffeine can also cause jitters, and for some, anxiety. All sources of caffeine should be avoided, including coffee, tea, chocolate, caffeinated sodas, and caffeine-containing medications.

- **Magnesium:** For mild anxiety, magnesium may be relaxing. Typically, 200–300 mg of magnesium are taken two to three times per day. Some doctors recommend soaking in a hot tub containing 1–2 cups of magnesium sulfate crystals (such as Epsom salts) for fifteen to twenty minutes, though support for this approach remains anecdotal. Note: excess magnesium may result in diarrhea.

- **B vitamin complex:** B vitamins, especially B6, aid in the optimal function of the nervous system. A deficiency in B6 may alter nerve function and increase the probability of stress-related symptoms such as depression and irritability. Investing in a well-rounded B-complex supplement can help build your reserves.

**Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Omega-3, one of the essential fatty acids (EFAs), is a structural molecule within the human body and in the brain in particular. By definition EFAs are "essential" and required from dietary sources because the body cannot produce them. America’s eating habits have led to a significant imbalance of omega-3 fatty acids. Not only do we not consume enough, many of our lifestyle practices also hinder their function in the body. For example, consuming damaged fat (found in hydrogenated oils and heated polyunsaturated oils) prevent omega-3s from being utilized. The U.S. diet has shifted away from two of the main sources of omega-3’s, which are fish and wild game. In addition, livestock no longer feed on omega-3-rich grasses; therefore, supplementation is becoming a sensible alternative. *Studies have found that omega-3 fats may aid sufferers of mood and cognitive disorders.* Some researchers believe EFAs help certain conditions by easing stress levels. Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), an omega-3 fatty acid found in fish oil, is a primary building block of the brain. Adequate levels of DHA are necessary for proper neurotransmissions, and deficiencies of this essential fat have been linked to memory loss and depression. Eat wild, cold-water varieties of fish, such as herring, sardines, mackerel, salmon, and tuna. Make the effort to purchase fresh, wild fish versus...
farmed. The latter are usually fed pellets of corn, soy, and canola, which are not omega-3 building foods like algae and other marine vegetation. Try to add fish into your diet twice per week. If this does not work with your lifestyle, consider fish oil supplements that provide 2 to 4 grams of fish oil per day.\textsuperscript{15,16}

**5-HTP:** 5-Hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) is the intermediate between tryptophan and serotonin. It is used by the body to make serotonin, an important substance for normal nerve and brain function. It has been shown that serotonin levels in individuals with depressed feelings are considerably lower than those in normal subjects. Individuals who respond to 5-HTP show a rise in serotonin levels similar to those with normal moods. Several studies have demonstrated improvements in people who did not respond positively to mood boosting prescription medications.\textsuperscript{17,18} A 5-HTP dose of 300 mg is sufficient in most cases of mood imbalances, but in some cases a higher dosage may be necessary.\textsuperscript{18} See the 5-HTP Fact Sheet for more information.

**Stress Reduction:** Reducing exposure to stressful situations can help decrease anxiety. In some cases, meditation, counseling, or group therapy can greatly facilitate this process.\textsuperscript{19} Regular aerobics exercise is one of the best methods for reducing stress.

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\textsuperscript{9} Werbach, Melvyn, M.D. *Nutritional Influences of Mental Illness*. Third Line Press. 1991.


\textsuperscript{14} *Aging: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 1993, vol. 5, no. 2


\textsuperscript{17} Takahashi S., Kondo H. Kato N. Effect of L-5-hydroxytryptophan on brain monoamine metabolism and evaluation of its clinical effect in depressed patients. *J Psychiatr Res* 1975; 12: 177-187
