Herbal medicine and the coronavirus

The National Institute of Medical Herbalists supports the guidance issued by the Department of Health for the containment and clinical management of coronavirus infection. We recommend that our members follow current health guidelines to protect both themselves and their patients from transmission of the virus.

Prevention of virus transmission and the subsequent development of the more serious effects of the infection are of prime importance. Present understanding of this infection is that the elderly, those with certain other medical conditions and those with impaired immunity are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the virus.

Medical herbalists have considerable experience of using herbal and dietary interventions to support people with conditions likely to bring about a reduced resistance against viral infections. The Institute therefore encourages its members to continue to use their experience in this area if they wish to support such people when requested to do so.

This work should be based on undertaking a patient history in the usual way, followed by a detailed assessment and recommendations for relevant herbal support. This support would be based on recognised clinical evidence, established traditional use and sound practitioner experience. As always, the safety and wellbeing of both the patient and the herbal practitioner should be the main priority. Where there is a history of recent exposure to the virus or symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 infection, herbal practitioners should follow the current Department of Health guidelines to reduce the risk of further virus transmission.

The Institute is mindful of the anxiety that this outbreak is causing within the population, and whilst continuing to welcome the exploration of herbal strategies to encourage resilience to infection we would not wish to support any spurious claims made by individuals or companies to provide “cures” for coronavirus. We are aware of many such products already being marketed and need to point out that, although some of these purport to be herbal in nature, these products are in no way representative of the accredited work of herbal practitioners within the Institute.
The novel nature of the virus causing COVID-19 infection means that research data about the likely effects of any therapeutic interventions on the epidemiology, infectivity and pathophysiology of this illness is scarce. For this reason it is not yet possible to highlight any specific herbal strategies that have been investigated.

Much research is already underway, with some treatment trials based on information extrapolated from previous, but unrelated, coronavirus infections. Some of these trials will include herbal elements of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which was used to manage many patients at the start of the outbreak in China. The World Health Organisation is registering many such trials at present. Initial information remains tentative, but there seems to be some evidence that patients who received a combination of TCM and conventional strategies may have done better than those who were offered just one type of treatment.

Another approach being explored by the herbal community is to use our previous experience of the pharmacokinetics of plant chemistry to target key stages in the pathogenic activity of the coronavirus during infection. Much of this knowledge is based on past research work done on other strains of coronavirus and may, as with many conventional medical strategies, inevitably involve a degree of extrapolation as far as the current infection is concerned for the time being.

The results of these studies are eagerly awaited. Meanwhile, the Institute is supportive of herbal strategies used to bring about enhanced immunity and increased resistance to infection. We would always encourage our members to integrate the herbal advice they provide with any conventional treatment or management strategies that are appropriate for their patients, and to observe the current infection control and management guidelines formulated by the Department of Health.

National Institute of Medical Herbalists
March 2020

Please note:
The information provided here is for information purposes only and is not intended to be used to diagnose or treat significant health problems. Any serious or long-term health concerns should always be discussed with a healthcare professional.