

## Herbal Toolbox for Headache Support

“Some pain you can distance yourself from, but a headache sits right where you live.” Mark Lawrence

### Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*)

- Mint family, non-aromatic. Bitter taste, cooling, calming, strengthening. Nervous system tonic. Restores/improves function after periods of prolonged stress.
- Safe for most people (including children and elders in small doses); very effective in over-stimulated conditions. Indicated for stressed out people who when nervous or agitated develop muscle spasms, nervous tics, or tight, painful muscles that can contribute to headache pain.
- Also useful for involuntary movement of muscles and tongue, tremors, restless leg syndrome, mild Tourette's syndrome, and grinding of the teeth. Very helpful for stress-induced headaches (when taken at onset.) Provides relief from neck and back pain (esp. in combination with Saint John's Wort as a tea or tincture.)
- In general, very helpful (esp when taken at onset) for stress-induced headaches. A specific for those I'm so tense I can't breathe kind of headaches, where your neck is spasming and you're getting ready to scream at the next person who speaks to you. Other indicators are if you grind your teeth (asleep or awake) or have lots of jaw tension pain or find that your fists are constantly clenched.
- Dose: Fresh plant tincture 2-3mL, 1-3x/day for acute calming effect (more relaxant than sedative). Tea 1-2 tsp/cup water is more restorative (to the nervous system) and sedative. Great bedtime tea (bitter taste, best in combination.) Suggested dose for tension headache: 3mL Skullcap tincture at onset and every 2 hours or as needed to stay on top of pain.
- Combinations:
  - Skullcap with Milky Oats for deep nervous system nourishment or for those who flinch and have a difficult time receiving touch (such as massage).
  - Skullcap with Valerian to enhance the sedative and muscle relaxant effects of both plants.
  - Skullcap with Saint John's Wort to relieve back and neck pain and elevate mood. Note: St. John's Wort is not compatible with many pharmaceutical drugs. Check with your herbalist or prescribing physician before trying this herb.



### Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*)

- Bitter, drying, calming, restorative, adaptogen (aids in the body's adaptation to stress).
  - A calming adaptogen that leads one into deeper states of knowledge or wisdom. Not sedative, but peaceful. Useful for insomnia when taken as a tonic (daily use for a period of 1-2 weeks at least).
  - Most important remedy for serious depletion of nerve or liver function. Direct action on the liver via oxygenation of blood (making it a good preventative aid for altitude sickness). Cleansing and restorative effect. Useful in a protocol for Hep C.
  - Reputation as a wisdom remedy, calms the nervous system. Aids one in feeling *known to oneself*. Allows for process of permanent realignment with a deeper part of yourself. Changes one as would prayer or meditation.
  - Dose: 16-32oz prepared tea daily. Long decoction of Reishi (4 plus hours, slow cookers are great for this). Approx. ¼ cup reishi per 32oz water (make a large batch and reheat as needed). Or look to purchase a quality reishi extract (Nebraska Mushroom Co, Arise Botanicals apothecary, MushroomScience.com capsules)



- When taken regularly as a tea (preferred) or capsule, it oxygenates the blood via it's moving/cleansing/clearing support to the liver. This oxygen rich blood is helpful in addressing chronic headache pain as a tonic preventative.
- Combinations:
  - Reishi with roasted Dandelion root for a liver-moving herbal coffee.
  - Reishi with chai spices (cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, clove) for a warming, aromatic tonic.
  - Reishi with Rosemary for a preventative aid for headaches stemming from deficient circulation to the head (a component of many migraine patterns). This combo is also potent aid in releasing held trauma.

### Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*)

- Warming, stimulating, pungent, aromatic, savory. Use as food. Smaller doses of tincture (too much can bring on headache): 5-15 drops, 1-3x/day. Best in formula.
- Medicinal action works on the junction of the liver and nervous system. Direct action on both (liver tonic, aids in detoxification; blood mover; specific to nerve weakness, *neurasthenia*).
- Specific for the cold, tired person whose nerves are shot. Depressed states. Deep acting; clears the body of bad memories via its stimulating effects on circulation. Aids in being present and releasing the past.
- Rosemary is a lovely herb for headaches of a cold, deficient nature, as it has a special affinity for increasing circulation to the head (caution, too much can bring on a headache). But rosemary has the added benefit of helping to move liver stagnation, when combined with other cooling and draining herbs.
- Combinations:
  - Rosemary with Milky Oats tincture to assist in weaning off substance.
  - Rosemary with Rose if one is in a difficult /"bad" emotional place.
  - Rosemary with Lemon Balm if digestion is out of sorts, esp due to nervous stomach.
  - Rosemary with Skullcap to strengthen and tonify nervous system.
  - Rosemary with Hawthorne to warm and open the heart (generosity) when closed off to others.



### Blue Vervain, Wild Hyssop (*Verbena hastata*)

- An herb that will tone and strengthen the whole nervous system while relaxing tension and stress. For many centuries, verbena was taken as a cure all due to tonic and restorative properties.
- A common species found in Nebraska is *Verbena stricta* or hoary vervain. It has very similar medicinal characteristics as *V. hastata*. Horticultural varieties of *Verbena* are not useful medicinals.
- Tincture, up to 1-2mL/30-60 drops up to 1-3x/day but a little goes a long way with this herb and 1-10 drops can provide a profound effect in calming stress and alleviating tension. Small doses (one drop at a time) can provide fast relief to building headache pain. Too much taken at once can actually aggravate some headaches. Go slow.
- Infusion 1tsp. per 8oz water, up to 32oz per day. Best taken in a formula with other herbs. Bitter flavor.
- Cautions: contraindicated in pregnancy and overt liver disease; at higher doses than recommended may cause GI irritation, including vomiting.
- Great herb for addressing disorienting PMS or neck tension headaches. Take multiple small doses (1-5 drops at a time) and focus on the feeling of release in your neck and shoulder muscles.
- Bitter tonic with hepatoprotective effects, anti-inflammatory, sedative, cool and dry energetics. Useful for depleted states, rebuilding, tonifying and facilitating return to parasympathetic state. Has an ability to stimulate or mimic the parasympathetic nervous system, decreasing heart rate, increasing GI secretions and



BLUE VERVAIN  
*Verbena hastata* L.  
VERVAIN FAMILY

- contracting smooth muscle (bronchi, uterus, bladder, etc.)
- Used specifically to address anxiety and the nervous exhaustion that follows long-term stress or a traumatic experience. Vervain is both stimulating (to physical function) and relaxing (to the mind).
- Also useful for recovery from excess alcohol consumption and spasms (esp. of neck and back) due to overexertion.
- Stimulates mental and spiritual clarity. Specific indication is a strong-willed person who tamps down their emotions and frustrations until they build and release in an outburst. These individuals tend to develop physical afflictions related to their unexpressed emotions (similar to Bach Flower Essence indication).
- Combinations:
  - As a potent aid in recovery from periods of high stress or illness, combine Vervain with Skullcap and Milky Oats (*Avena sativa*) tinctures
  - Vervain with White Peony root tincture to calm a constant stress response and release muscle tension

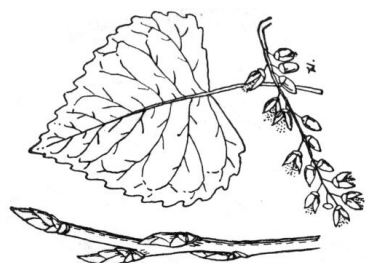
### **Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*)**

- This herb has a cool, bitter flavor and is well known as an aid for migraine prevention. While the entire above-ground portion is medicinally active, typically the leaves and flowers are used (leaves especially in addressing migraine pain).
- Feverfew was first employed in the treatment of migraines by chewing 2-3 of the fresh leaves daily. However, some reacted by developing mouth sores, or swelling of the tongue, mouth and lips. Today, many take the dried herb in capsule form instead and are able to reduce the frequency of their migraines. Fresh plant tinctures are also very useful.
- Feverfew does not work for all types of migraines, however. It is found most effective for preventing chronic migraines associated with stagnant liver function. It works best for those with pulsing headache pain, heavy menstrual bleeding and cramping, flushed skin, and poor digestion.
- According to Gazmend Skendiu in *Herbal Vade Mecum* (Herbacy Press, NJ, 2003), feverfew releases serotonin from blood platelets, which may in part explain its anti-migraine properties. Sharon Tilgner, N.D., in *Medicines from the Earth* (Wise Acre Press, Creswell, OR, 1999) states that feverfew decreases platelet aggregation, which could account for its Blood-moving properties that would also alleviate certain migraines.
- Feverfew was traditionally used by the ancient Greeks to reduce inflammation and as an emmenagogue for menstrual cramps. Traditionally Feverfew has also been used for colds, flu, digestive problems, headaches, nervous afflictions, pain due to poor circulation, coughs, wheezing, or difficult breathing. As well, the plant was applied topically to treat insect bites and its oil on arthritic pain. It is an all-around anti-inflammatory, bitter tonic.
- Clinical trials have found Feverfew, used with no other lifestyle changes, to be clearly effective for a third to a half of migraine patients in a general population. The herb, taken continuously in the form of fresh leaves, reduces the frequency of migraine attacks.
- Dose: 3-9 g; infuse 1 tsp/cup water, drink 2-3 cups/day; 10-40 drops tincture 1-4 times/day
- Precautions: pregnancy; do not use for migraines resulting from weakness or any deficiency; don't take while on blood thinner medication or using any medications broken down by the liver; stop using before surgery. Those with an allergy to ragweed may have sensitivity to Feverfew.



## Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*)

- The medicine offered by this tree is best received from the resinous buds. This compound is highly aromatic which lends to its warming, blood moving and anti-microbial qualities. Aromatic herbs are particularly called for in stuffy sinus headaches. Cottonwood is specific for hot, flushed, full and sometimes throbbing kind of headaches.
- A tincture or tea of the bark and leaves can also be used. The bark contains salicylates, which are converted to salicylic acid in stages in the intestine and liver and are the origins of what is now manufactured as aspirin. Like Willow bark, Cottonwood medicine is sometimes referred to as “nature's aspirin” because it also contains anti-inflammatory salicylates in its bark. This can be helpful for many types of headache pain, but generally not best applied to cold deficient headaches. Some herbalists claim that they've seen the best results for headache pain from extracts of Cottonwood bark. My experience has been largely centered around the use of the buds because harvesting bark is often detrimental to the health of the tree. I look forward to learning more from this medicinal tree as I continue to work with it in different forms.



- Chemical constituents within the resin of Cottonwood known as salicin and populin, are helpful for relieving many types of pain. Resins are best extracted in alcohol or oil so a tincture or topical application of oil is best.
  - Medicine from the resinous buds is also helpful for imbalances and disorders of the respiratory and GI tracts. Other traditional uses have been in alleviating dark and heavy depressed moods.
  - Combines well with whatever specific headache herb is called for to potentiate (amplify the effect of) the formula. Contradicted in people with aspirin reactions or those on anticoagulants.
- Dose: For headache, tincture of the buds is best taken in initial 1 drop dose to assess for good fit. If slight improvement is felt, 10-15 drops can be taken every 30 minutes or as needed. A decoction (low simmer) of the bark, 1 tsp. bark to 8oz water, taken at onset of headache up to 32oz.

**General Triggers:** This is a short list of some of the more common causes of episodic headaches.

- |                       |                                     |                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Alcohol             | • Drugs – a wide variety            | • Sinus infection           |
| • Allergies           | • Eyestrain (cars, computers, etc.) | • Sleep – lack of           |
| • Birth control pills | • Hormonal fluctuations             | • Smells                    |
| • Caffeine withdrawal | • Hunger                            | • Stress – physical, mental |
| • Dehydration         | • Injury and inflammation           | • Emotional                 |
| • Diet                | • Muscle tension                    | • Tight jaw                 |
| • Depression          |                                     |                             |

### Sources:

Kiva Rose, “Headache Treatment with Herbal Differentials”, The Anima Center  
Darcy Blue, “Natural Therapies for Headaches”, Shamana Flora Herbs  
Paul Bergner, “Migraines and Pain”, North American Institute of Medical Herbalism  
Leslie Tierra, “Feverfew and Chrysanthemum”, Planetary Herbs  
Jim MacDonald, “Surviving Sinusitis”, Herbcraft.org  
Steven Horne, “Treatment of Headaches”, The School of Modern Herbal Medicine  
7Song, “An Herbalists View on Headaches”, Northeast School of Botanical Medicine