Herbal remedies for healthy holidays

The holidays have finally arrived! Time for the whole family to get away, explore new places, go hiking, swimming and have outdoor adventures. You want to make sure that your family all stay healthy so that you can enjoy this precious time with no distractions to spoil your fun. Pamela Spence, medical herbalist, knows exactly how to treat minor aches and pains, and more serious ones too, using child-friendly herbal remedies

Feature Kate Smith **Photos** Seth Gardner, Redsnappa, www.redsnappa.com

Pamela Spence is a medical herbalist and writer living and working in Scotland. She owns a busy clinic in Ayrshire with her husband and also sees patients near Glasgow. She runs workshops, talks and herb walks nationally and internationally and has most recently appeared on the BBC online series The Scottish Hedgewitch. You can contact her via her website www.pamelaspence.co.uk

Holidays are supposed to be times of relaxation, but they can also have their challenges: long journeys in a car, coach or plane are stressful enough for adults, but for children they can be a real ordeal, especially if they suffer from travel sickness. Long periods of exposure to the sun, uncomfortable encounters with biting insects or unfamiliar food can also test our youngest family members. Thankfully, these problems are mainly short-lived and a little gentle encouragement is often enough to overcome minor ailments. Pamela Spence, a medical herbalist, puts her trust in the healing power of Mother Nature. Herbal remedies rarely have side-effects as long as they are given appropriately. They help to support the body and are easy to use, making them ideal for children.

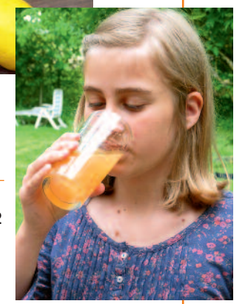
Pamela, what should people do before or during the journey to ensure that their children start off the holidays on the right foot?
PAMELA SPENCE: I think it's important to be prepared and pack a few things to have to hand. If parents feel they can do something to help, they are less anxious and that in turn can calm the whole situation. I usually advise people to put together a herbal first aid kit that can be easily transported. As for the journey, it depends on how you are travelling and for how long. Families often travel in their cars and in that case it's advisable to take some precautionary measures if the children are known to have travel sickness. Typical symptoms can include nausea, vomiting, dizziness and sweating. To spare the children (and of course also the adults!) from having to deal with this, you can give them either ginger tea or apple juice with ginger and lemon half an hour before you set off. Ginger prevents nausea and calms the stomach. You can make the ginger tea earlier and let it cool too. If they don't like ginger, you can also try peppermint tea. I always keep a packet of peppermints in the car for emergencies – the peppermint oil soothes the stomach and can stop nausea.

On holiday there is often unfamiliar food and spices and sometimes also bacteria that can upset children's digestion. How can parents be prepared for that?
PAMELA SPENCE: If the child is feeling nauseous then again, ginger or peppermint tea can help. If they have cramping in their tummies then fennel tea can ease this – it is a traditional ingredient of gripe water given to young babies. It is also a calming herb so it can help to soothe their mood. If the child has diarrhoea, then any foods containing a high percentage of tannins will be helpful. Tannins are the chemicals that make your mouth feel dry and this action helps tighten up the mucous membrane of the bowel. It depends what you can get hold of, of course, but dried berries, like blueberries are very good to chew over the course of the day. Or you can make a concentrated tea by steeping the blueberries in hot water. Again, this can be taken cold and should be sipped over the course of the day.

Herbal teas and gentle massages can relieve stomach aches

Raspberry leaf tea is also a reliable, gentle way of calming diarrhoea. Dried raspberry leaf is easily available loose or in teabags in many health food shops, or you can pick your own and use it fresh. Blackberry leaf has similar qualities. Simply steep for 5-10 minutes and have the child sip the tea. It has a pleasant taste and can be sweetened with honey. Honey is also a natural antibiotic so can help support the immune system and fight any bacteria that are causing the symptoms. A hot pack, or a light abdominal massage can also help to relieve cramping. Sunflower oil infused with fennel makes an ideal massage oil to use on sore tummies. ▶

GINGER FOR TRAVEL SICKNESS



Ingredients: ½ litre apple juice, approx. 2 tablespoons fresh ginger, 1 organic lemon

Preparation: Pour the apple juice into a jug. Cut the ginger with the skin still on into small pieces or grate. The essential oils are located right under the skin so it's best not to peel the ginger. Juice the lemon and add to the apple juice. Leave the juice to sit for one hour, then pass through a fine sieve (in case the children are put off by the ginger pieces)

How to Use: Drink a glass half an hour before setting off. Pour the rest into a bottle or a Thermos flask and take it with you to sip during the journey.

Useful tips for therapists, carers and parents on how to use medicinal plants and herbs for children, from babies to teenagers, can be found in this practical book 'Herbal Treatment of Children: Western and Ayuravedic Perspectives' by Anne McIntyre. The book contains detailed descriptions of easy ways to deal with bowel problems, gastric disorders, respiratory illness and other common ailments. It costs £25.99 from Butterworth-Heinemann www.store.elsevier.com and also available at www.amazon.co.uk. For more information or to seek advice about specific questions from a local herbalist, visit The National Institute of Medical Herbalists at www.nimh.org.uk. Tel: 01392 426022.

BERRY INFUSION

Ingredients: 250ml cold water, 1.5 tablespoons dried blueberries or blackberries (hand-picked and dried or from a health food shop)

Preparation: Bring the water and the berries to the boil. Leave to simmer for 10 minutes, then strain.

How to Use: Take the infusion, one spoonful at a time, max. 3 cups a day, in the case of diarrhoea. Sweeten with honey if required.

Tip Fresh blueberries stimulate your bowel as they contain fibre and help with constipation. Dried berries have the opposite effect and as an infusion they can help to effectively and gently stop diarrhoea.

CHAMOMILE & LIMEFLOWER INFUSION

Ingredients: 250ml hot water, chamomile flowers, limeflowers. The herbs can be fresh or dried

Preparation: Add 2 tablespoons fresh or 1 tablespoon dried herbs into a tea pot and pour over hot water. Put the lid on straight away and leave to brew for 5-10 minutes. Strain and, if necessary, pour into small bottles to transport. This stomach-settling tea is also suitable for babies.

How to Use: Drink sips when necessary. The tea is antispasmodic, soothing and anti-inflammatory.

Limeflowers are the blossoms of the Lime Tree (Tilia europaea) found all around Northern Europe, especially in parks and gardens. The flowers bloom in mid-May and the delicious honey scent can be smelled all around them. If you pick your own, they can be used fresh or dried for use throughout the year.

Of course, it is very important to make sure your child takes in enough fluid and that any severe or prolonged diarrhoea is checked by a medical doctor.

What else would you recommend? What plants and herbs are particularly useful?
PAMELA SPENCE: Sometimes stomach ache in children is not so much because of an invading pathogen, but because they are anxious. New surroundings, strange beds and unusual foods can all help to make a child feel out of their routine. Calming herbal teas are great to help them feel more settled, then let them get a good sleep and once this happens, the symptoms can often disappear. Chamomile is key as it is an anti-spasmodic, great for gut spasm, as well as calming and soothing. If you can get hold of it, limeflower tea is also a great choice – traditionally used in France to calm fractious children! It has a subtly sweet, honey flavour and combines well with chamomile. But as always, if it doesn't settle or improve quickly, or if you are unsure, check with a doctor.

Act quickly in the case of sunburn and painful insect stings

Children's sensitive skin is always in danger from the sun's rays on long hikes, in the swimming pool or in the sea – especially if insufficient sun protection is applied. What precautionary measures can be taken?
PAMELA SPENCE: It is important to make sure that the child is properly protected from the sun but it is much healthier, and safer, to use sun creams from natural cosmetics manufacturers to limit the number of toxic chemicals that are being absorbed through the skin.

And if they still manage to get sunburnt?
PAMELA SPENCE: It is important to keep the skin cool and for that aloe vera gel is very helpful. Always have a tube of aloe vera in your herbal kit and make sure you buy one that is over 99% pure. The aloe vera should be applied liberally to any areas that are red. The gel will draw the heat and act as an anti-inflammatory on the skin. Lavender essential oil can also be applied to reddened skin (it is used in some hospital burns units to aid healing). It is one of the only essential oils that can be applied directly onto the skin and it has important anti-inflammatory and healing properties.

Marigold is another important herb for skin healing and it can be added to the bath or applied as a wash using a cold, concentrated infusion made from the petals. You can also make an infused oil to use once the skin has cooled and is beginning to heal.

It is also important to drink lots of fluid, stay out of the sun and be on the lookout for symptoms of sunstroke which include dizziness, headache, lack of urination, dry skin and a high temperature. If you spot these symptoms, ask for medical help.

Insect bites can also be a hazard. Is there anything parents can do about those?
PAMELA SPENCE: If you are out in nature, look out for ribwort plantain. It is a very familiar plant that can be found in almost any grassy area. Take a couple of leaves and rub them between your fingers, or chew them, until the sap starts to come out. Dab this sap onto the affected area, much like many of us were taught to do with dock leaves to counteract nettle stings. It has a remarkable anti-inflammatory action and can take away the itch. It is also useful to prevent blisters from tight shoes.

Marigold (Calendula officinalis) is one of our best-known plants for healing wounds. It is an annual, but mostly self-seeding, and can grow easily in sunny spots in the garden. The flowers should be picked around midday when they are fully open. The cream can be used for sunburn and sore skin and the spray used to clean cuts and grazes

COOLING MARIGOLD SKIN CREAM

Ingredients: A handful of fresh or dried marigold flowers, 200ml organic sunflower oil, lavender essential oil, a clear sealable jar, unperfumed base cream

Preparation: Put the flowerheads in the jar and cover with the sunflower oil adding more if necessary. Close the lid and leave on the window sill for about two weeks. Shake occasionally to release the active agents then filter using a fine sieve. The oil can then be stored for up to a year in a cool, dark place.

How to Use: Add 10mls of the infused oil and 5 drops of lavender essential oil per 60g unperfumed base cream and mix well. Spoon into sterilised jars and label. Rub the cream into sore, irritated or sunburned skin.

MARIGOLD LOTION FOR TREATING WOUNDS

Ingredients: A handful of fresh or dried marigold flowers, 200ml 40% alcohol (e.g. vodka), a clear sealable jar, 4 x 50ml spray bottles

Preparation: Fill the jar with the flowers. Pour over the alcohol until they are all covered. Leave for about three weeks on the window sill and shake daily, then filter and pour into the spray bottles.

How to Use: The lotion should be diluted 1:10 with water for cleaning wounds and treating grazes and lacerations. It can also be used as a mouth rinse, e.g. for sore gums. The anti-inflammatory chemicals in the marigold flowers encourage the wounds to heal and close up quickly.

THE HEALING POWER OF FENNEL

Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare) originally comes from the Mediterranean. The biennial plant prefers nutrient-rich spots in the garden and blooms in July. It is a very useful herb to ease colic, indigestion and nausea

GENTLE MASSAGE WITH FENNEL OIL

Ingredients for the oil: 100ml organic sunflower oil, 5 tablespoons fennel seeds (hand-picked and dried or from a health food shop), a clear sealable jar

Preparation: Crush the fennel seeds in a pestle and mortar. Add them to the jar together with the sunflower oil. Close the lid and leave on the window sill for two weeks. Shake occasionally to release the active agents, then filter using a fine sieve. The oil can then be stored for up to a year in a cool, dark place.

How to Use: A gentle stomach massage with the oil helps relieve constipation, wind and stomach ache. Distribute the oil in gentle, circular motions clockwise from the navel outwards. This matches the bowel's natural flow. After the massage, lay a hot water bottle onto the stomach.

DESERT ISLAND HERBS

If all you have time to do is to grab a couple of things before your trip, Pamela Spence recommends that you choose chamomile tea bags and a bottle of lavender essential oil.
Here are Pamela's top tips to get the most out of these two hard-working herbs:

Chamomile is very versatile and can be given to even the youngest family members.
- Drink as a hot or cold infusion to relieve stomach cramps, reduce symptoms of hayfever, calm irritable children (or adults!) and soothe them into a good night's sleep.
- Use the cooled herbal infusion as a wash for sun burn, nappy rash or any irritated skin.
- Lay cooled teabags onto the eyelids to relieve itchy, inflamed eyes.

Lavender essential oil comes in a tiny bottle and is so easy to transport.
- Apply directly onto the skin to soothe burns, including sunburn, speed skin healing and as a reliable antiseptic to keep wounds clean.
- Dab a couple of drops on the pillow, or add to a bath to relax and aid a restful sleep.