

Herbal Support for Yoga Injury and Healthy Joints

by James Bailey, L.Ac, MATCM, MPH, Dipl Ayu

The use of botanical remedies for pain and injury is an essential part of both my medical and yoga practice. In my early 30's I began to notice an increased sensitivity in the joints and soft tissues during strong vinyasa style yoga classes. I found that by applying herbs both internally and topically I was less sore after class and prevented any potential injury. Results with my patients similarly show that herbs can be an invaluable aid in both supporting and preventing injury for yoga practitioners.

Injuries caused by hatha yoga practice are usually minor, limited to simple ligament sprains and muscle strains, with the occasional slip, fall or forced adjustment. Some of the more common injuries occur at the wrists, shoulders, hamstrings, along the spine, and knees. If not addressed these minor setbacks can have a long term impact on the balance of alignment within the practice. Some bring injuries from off the mat into their yoga practice as well. These injuries can also have life-long effects upon our range of motion, the way we breathe, our supply of energy, and the quality of meditation we bring into the practice. If untreated, they may become chronic or easily re-injure, affecting the circulation of prana through the body, and potentially the chakras, depending upon the location, intensity and cause of the injury.

Given the legitimate concern about the adverse effects of pharmaceutical pain killers, botanical remedies are a milder and safer alternative. There are two botanical approaches to injury care. In the trauma phase, when an injury first occurs, I recommend herbs both internally and topically to relieve acute pain and inflammation. After the pain subsides, we introduce herbs in the recovery phase to nourish and strengthen the joints and soft tissues in a rejuvenative manner to complete the healing and prevent re-injury.

The Trauma Phase: Pain and Inflammation

In the first stage of an injury, simple strains and sprains require compounds that improve the circulation of prana and blood in and around the site of injury. Pain, swelling and inflammation have the undesired effect of reducing local circulation. Herbs should be used both internally and topically for best results. Topical applications allow us to target the traumatized area directly. The active constituents of the herbs are absorbed through the skin for a more immediate and targeted effect.

In a clinical environment each type of injury is afforded a distinct treatment, with different herbs for different types of injuries in varying areas of the body. Among a large class of generic analgesic and anti-inflammatory substances, a few Ayurvedic classics stand out. Salai Guggul (*Commiphora mukul*), Kapitthaparni (*Frankincense, Boswellia serrata*) and Bola (*Myrrh, Commiphora myrrha*) are three related plant sap resins famous in Ayurvedic herbal medicine for reducing pain, strengthening bones and joints, and cleansing the blood of toxins which accumulate around injury sites.

White willow (*Salix alba*) is a commonly used Native American remedy for pain. White willow is well known as a natural source of salicylic acid, the forerunner of aspirin, but without the blood thinning and stomach irritating side effects of the pharmaceutical derivative. It is an excellent remedy for arthritic and rheumatic pain, and improves mobility in sore or creaky joints. Notoginseng (*San Qi, Panax pseudoginseng*) is a relative of *Panax ginseng*, well respected for its analgesic effects on injury; it is used throughout Asia to improve circulation, and support the adrenal glands in the production of inflammation-reducing corticosteroids. Turmeric (*Haridra, Curcuma longa*), also known as curcuma, is a well-known Ayurvedic remedy for pain and inflammation.

The Recovery Phase: Complete Healing and Prevention

Once the acute pain and inflammation subsides, we begin the recovery phase treatment. Special herbs can be used to nourish and support the joints and soft tissues to complete the healing and prevent re-injury. These herbs are ideal for yoga practitioners who have ongoing weaknesses in the joints. As a form of food for the joints and soft tissues, these herbs do not remedy the acute aggravated phase of the injury. Instead, they strengthen the integrity of the tissues and support a more complete recovery. Because the joints undergo a fair amount of strain during a yoga practice, it is not unusual for yogis to experience mild to moderate aches that

may not warrant the time and expense of clinical treatment. In this case, the joint nourishing herbs below would be indicated.

For the later stage of injury recovery I use herbs which supply a natural source of collagen and silica, important for rebuilding the injured site. Eucommia (Du Zhong, *Eucommia ulmoides*), a renewable tree bark, is used to supply enormous amounts of natural plant collagen directly to the damage area in a manner that is impossible from ordinary table foods. It can be safely used as a long term joint supplement for both injury recovery and prevention. Eucommia is traditionally said to strengthen a weak lower back and knees, protecting the lumbar spine and sacrum in back bending and hip opening postures, and the knees in postures such as lotus and *vi-rasana*. Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), a reed-like plant (not an actual horse's tail) contains large amounts of natural silica which speeds the repair and regeneration of connective tissue, improving its strength and elasticity.

I should stress that for mild to moderate injuries the combination of topical and internal botanical remedies is meant to compliment the conventional wisdom of resting and icing. I find in my practice that yogis too often fail to rest an injury, even for a few days, resulting in chronic inflammation and stagnation of prana in the area of the injury. Not every injury can be remedied by working through it, or by modifying the practice. Sometimes a break from the practice, ranging from a few days to a few weeks depending on the severity, may be necessary for complete healing. For serious injuries or those which do not show significant improvement within 72 hours, a professional health care provider should be consulted.

For most of us, the discomforts and minor injuries that arise from the practice are a constant teacher. They show us where and when to back off, and where to put more of our attention. They show us where we are awake, and where we are asleep. May you always be awake!