

postures, increase of fluid intake, and dietary changes including increased fiber and fruit. Apple-pear juice is also highly recommended; and stewed fruits like prunes, figs, or dates especially when mixed in licorice tea make a tasty laxative snack.

Herbal laxatives

There are three classes of herbal laxatives - bulk, mild (but not bulk) and purgative. The bulk herbs may need 12 to 24 hours to encourage a bowel movement, and irritating herbs somewhat less time, perhaps 6 to 12 hours.

Bulk laxatives

Bulk laxatives are the gentlest for occasional constipation. Flaxseed (also known as linseed), psyllium, and fenugreek are three well-known herbal bulk laxatives. One can take one tablespoon of whole seeds two to three times a day, followed by two cups of liquid. To help bulk laxatives do their job properly, one must drink a lot of water, otherwise gastrointestinal obstructions can occur.

Purgative or cathartic laxatives

Purgative laxatives are the category most utilized; and purgative herbs are used in health food store formulations and in many commercial over-the-counter laxatives. This group includes aloe, buckthorn, cascara sagrada, rhubarb, and senna. All the herbs in this category contain anthraquinones, strong and irritating chemical compounds that force the bowels to evacuate. They should be used only as a last resort.

Pregnant or nursing mothers should not use these irritants, nor should people with gastrointestinal problems including ulcers, ulcerative colitis, irritable bowel syndrome, and hemorrhoids.

Avoid the prolonged use of purgative laxatives. The continual use can cause lazy bowel syndrome. When this negative cycle develops the result is a sluggish digestive system unable to evacuate without the use of more laxatives. Studies also show that chronic over-use of constipation relieving drugs can lead to disturbances of the body's electrolyte equilibrium. In turn this can result in potassium deficiency and a concomitant problem for those who are taking heart medications.

The gentlest of this class of cathartic laxative herbs is cascara sagrada, known as "sacred bark" from a Native American tree (*Rhamnus purshiana*), try rhubarb root (*Rheum officinale*). It is one of the safest and least violent, but it should be reserved for occasional use only. Senna (*Cassia acutifolia* & *C. angustifolia*) is a bit stronger and also quite popular. It, too, is a main ingredient of many over-the-counter laxatives.

Another herb in this category, aloe, is even more problematic. Its popularity has recently increased and it is a wonderful herb to use externally for skin care. But because of its use, its name is becoming more known, and some people assume that because it is safe for one purpose, that it is ok to try for another reason. A recent magazine article suggested drinking aloe vera juice on a daily basis. But many western herbalists do not recommend aloe as a laxative because it is too strong, although it has a history of use in Ayurvedic medicine.

Herbal Laxatives

Herbal laxatives promote bowel activity with mild purgation. They are used when there is constipation, insufficient fiber in the diet,

blood toxicity, gallstones, hypertension, a skin condition caused by insufficient elimination, or an infection in which cleansing of the bowel is needed.

The most frequently used laxative herb is cascara sagrada. Senna, the second most frequently used one, is actually a purgative; it is stronger and harsher (only 1 cup of the tea daily).

Other laxatives include aloe vera, licorice root, psyllium seed, wahoo bark, and dandelion root (when there is liver involvement). They can be combined or taken individually. Some, like cascara and senna, operate by purging the bowels; others (such as psyllium seed, flaxseed, and agar agar) provide a soft gel-like bulk that slides it out (see demulcents, below). During fevers, these laxative herbs help cool the system by eliminating heat from the intestines.

Table 1 contains a list of herbs that promotes bowel action: buckthorn bark, cleavers, agar agar, boneset, flaxseed, licorice root, cascara sagrada, elder, mandrake, motherwort, Oregon grape root, goldenseal, senna, safflower, yellow dock, and peach bark.

Demulcents

Demulcent herbs bathe and lubricate the intestines and help expel contents, especially when the fecal matter in the bowel is dry. The best ones are psyllium seed, flaxseed, slippery elm, and agar agar. Here are several other demulcents: fenugreek, licorice root, comfrey root, aloe vera, and mullein.

Herbal Enema

Instead of a laxative, an herbal enema can be taken. A peppermint tea enema is one of the best.

Carminatives

Purgative herbs should be combined with carminative native herbs, to lessen griping. Carminatives contain volatile oils which stimulate the expulsion of flatus (gas) from the bowels and peristalsis. The best is peppermint. Here are several other carminatives: angelica, anise, caraway, catnip, celery, chamomile, coriander, cumin, dill, fennel, garlic, ginger, myrrh, saffras, thyme, and valerian.

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