

# COVID-19, WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE DON'T KNOW AND SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT STAYING WELL

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We are all experiencing something that has not occurred since the 1918 influenza pandemic. We have had more regionalized outbreaks of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome/SARS-CoV), Ebola, and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome/MERS-CoV), as well as much less deadly strains of Influenza, but nothing quite like the new novel Corona virus COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). For most of us it has disrupted our lives, jobs, plans and created widespread fear, panic buying and confusion. The internet is rife with “cures”, worst-case scenarios, sunny-day prophecies and some very good information, if you can separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak.

*I pay attention to:*

## WHO

[https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1)  
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

## the CDC

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

## the NIH

<https://www.nih.gov/health-information/coronavirus>  
<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/coronavirusinfections.html>

So as not to reinvent the wheel, I have also included in this post some blogs from fellow trusted and highly respected Herbalists Thomas Easley, RH, Nicholas Schnell RH and Donnie Yance RH (on Elderberry) at the end of this page. Of course, none of us can say what will actually work or be effective, but we are all striving to provide useful information, and I thank them for their permission to share their opinions, knowledge and hard work.

At this point hopefully, we all know that social distancing and frequent hand washing (with soap and water), as well as not touching our faces (much easier to say than do) are the keys to prevention of COVID-19. One thing that people who frequently wash their hands already know is that this essential practice also dries out your hands and most people within days start to develop dry, chapped, sore hands, with cracking skin, skin tears or pain. It is also vital that after you thoroughly wash your hands (20 seconds - sing the “happy birthday to you” song twice) and dry them, you **MOISTURIZE**. It only took 4 days for me to realize that the frequent hand washing was taking a toll on my hands. Some “moisturizers” known as Occlusives make a protective barrier on the skin preventing water loss (like petroleum jelly, dimethicone or lanolin), while others known as Humectants pull water from deeper layers of the skin or air (glycerin, honey, panthenol), these should be combined with occlusive agents. Finally, Emollients help make the skin feel soft and while chemical emollients do little to

actually moisturize the skin, herbs in cream bases such as Calendula, Gotu Kola, Plantain leaf, Chamomile or Chickweed can help heal damaged skin. Natural skin/hand creams containing vegetable fats such as Shea butter, Cocoa butter, Coconut oil, Argan Oil, Jojoba oil, etc., can offer benefits as occlusives, emollients and anti-inflammatories (see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5796020/pdf/ijms-19-00070.pdf> ). If your hands are badly chapped treating them at night and covering your hands with white cotton gloves (sold on Amazon) can make a significant difference in only a few days.

## What We Don't Know:

Can any herb, supplement, and/or diet help prevent or treat COVID-19 ? **We simply do not know.** In China, which has the longest experience (months) treating this disease, they have published extensive papers and notes (not research studies) on how they used TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) formulas to try to prevent this disease and for treating patients with COVID-19 infections. The doctors using these complex formulas claim they were very helpful, but only clinical trials or retrospective studies will actually show how useful they actually were. In addition, TCM is not a one size fits all approach and each patient was treated according to their unique disease patterns (hot/dry, hot/damp, cold/dry, wind/dry, wind/heat, etc.). While some of the Chinese herbs being recommended for prevention (Astragalus, Reishi, Licorice) or treatment (Honeysuckle flowers, Forsythia fruit, Isatis leaf or root, Burdock seed, Baikal Skullcap, Andrographis) are commonly used and are usually widely available here (many of these herbs are now in short supply in the US), there are many much more obscure herbs being utilized that are not available in North America. I have included a few of these papers here , but unless you have access to a TCM practitioner, it is unlikely that most people would be able to fully understand or use this information.

### [Guandong article](#)



### [Hubei article](#)

Evidence shows that many things being recommended via the internet to prevent or treat COVID-19 such as colloidal silver, vitamin C, drinking water constantly, bleach (dangerous as well) or internal use of essential oils (also potentially harmful) **do not**

**work.** Unfortunately, drug trials suggest that several pharmaceutical medications that were thought to be possible treatments for COVID-19 (the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine, the HIV combination drug Kaletra and the antiviral medication Arbidol) failed to show any benefits in preliminary human clinical trials.

So, to recap, the best and most effective way to prevent infection is social distancing, avoiding contact with infected individuals (hard to know who that might be, since testing is still so spotty and it can be spread by people who are asymptomatic), frequent hand washing with soap and water, not touching your face and being careful when handling possibly contaminated items. I have included this video which you may have already seen on how to reduce the risks of shopping and dealing with food and other items coming into your home <https://youtu.be/sjDuwc9KBps>

### ***Does this mean that is all I am doing?***

Actually no, I think there are many possibilities that can enhance overall health and perhaps resistance and our ability to fight an infection.

**Addressing the foundations of health.** Herbs and supplements can be useful in many ways, but they are not foundational when it comes to your health. No one has ever gotten ill from a St John's wort or Saw Palmetto deficiency!

One of the foundations of good health is adequate and good quality sleep. If you sleep 8-9 hours per night and do not wake up feeling refreshed there is a good chance you have some type of sleep disorder, or your sleep is being disturbed by noise, light or some other external factor. Try to get a minimum of 7 hours sleep, preferably 8 for adults (more for teenagers and children), avoid drinking alcohol at night, watching disturbing films or shows, reading page-turners, consuming stimulants, late night eating, keep your room dark, use a sleep mask or earplugs if light or noise are issues that you cannot control, have a regular bed-time and nervine teas or tinctures such as Lemon Balm, Lavender, Passion Flower, Chamomile, Milky Oat (fresh tincture or glycerite are effective), Lemon Verbena or Linden Flower can enhance sleep quality and reduce sleep latency.

Diet is also foundational, the saying "eat the rainbow" is the basis of an anti-inflammatory diet (I am not talking about Skittles, I mean eat fresh or frozen berries and other fruits that are purple, red, or green, as well as red, orange, yellow, white or purple vegetables, dark green leafy vegetables or black or red legumes). I do not believe in fad diets or extreme diets (there are exceptions like a ketogenic diet for children with seizure disorders). **Eat Healthy** - common sense, simple diets like the Mediterranean diet, ovo-lacto vegetarian diets, the DASH diet, the flexitarian diet are easy to follow and help maintain a healthy weight, reduce inflammation, blood pressure, serum glucose and insulin resistance. They can also be tailored to a person's tastes, do not require expensive or hard to find ingredients and are

sustainable. Regularly eat soluble fiber (beans, oatmeal, carrots, okra, barley, chia and flax seeds, peas, lentils), fresh or frozen vegetables (it is spring, if you have a garden, order seeds or plants by mail and get them in the ground, we need our COVID-19 victory gardens and gardening is good exercise), whole grains, legumes, fresh or frozen fruits, nuts, seeds (pumpkin seeds are a good source of zinc and essential fatty acids), Alliums (garlic, leeks, onions, scallions, shallots, ramps, etc.), antioxidant/anti-inflammatory spices, organic dairy, organic or game meats (if you eat meat) and wild deep sea fish. I try to avoid refined carbohydrates (sugar of any type, agave syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, brown rice syrup, white rice, white flour, potato chips), fried foods, trans fats, processed meats, excess salt (the average American consumes somewhere between 2-4 times the daily recommended sodium intake and **NO** sea salt, Tibetan salt, Celtic salt or Martian salt are not really much healthier), excess alcohol and all the other processed foods you know are not good for you. I prefer to get my nutrients from food and concentrated nutrient-dense foods such as Spirulina, Dandelion leaf powder, seaweeds, Amla fruit, Beet Powder, Nettle leaf powder and other similar “super foods”. Still, there are some nutrients it is difficult to get in adequate amounts just from your diet. This includes a number of nutrients that are anti-inflammatory and essential for immune health such as magnesium (I often recommend magnesium bisglycinate or magnesium malate), vitamin D (there is the Sun!), zinc, selenium (3 Brazil nuts contain about 150-200 mcg of selenium), vitamin A (many people cannot efficiently convert carotenoids into vitamin A and have very low serum levels) and omega 3 fatty acids (unfortunately humans cannot efficiently convert plant based omega 3s (ALA) into EPA and even less so for DHA (I like Coromega fish oils with vitamin D)).

Exercise - Our bodies are meant to move, and being sedentary is very unhealthy. While we are homebound, if you can go outside safely and get some sun and fresh air, do so. Walk, ride your exercise bike or go biking (again as long as you can maintain social distancing), practice tai chi, qi gong or yoga, work out at home, deep clean your home, dance or garden. All of these practices improve circulation, help maintain weight, reduce blood sugar levels and reduce stress.

Stress reduction techniques- This is an incredibly stressful time, we are worried about the possibility of loved ones or ourselves getting sick. We are practicing social distancing and miss our friends, family and usual activities (I suppose we are now seeing some of the benefits of the internet and smart phones!). Many people are out of work, and our finances or businesses may be under serious pressure. We may be working from home with our partners and children and while that can be lovely, it can also be distracting and stressful. Going to the supermarket may feel dangerous, as can other necessary tasks such as people who are still working away from home or even more so in hospitals. We are bombarded daily with scary news, unknown time frames and increasing mortality figures. I am not saying ignore the news, but reading every post or listening to every newscast at some point becomes counterproductive. Get the news you need to know and then do something else. Read, watch funny films, paint,

write, garden, listen to music, cook, learn a new skill or two, find ways to enjoy yourself and laugh if possible. If you find your anxiety level increasing take the Bach Flower Rescue Remedy, or anxiolytic herbs such as Motherwort, Blue Vervain, Chinese Polygala, Bacopa, Lavender, Ashwagandha, Gotu Kola, Chamomile (good for anxious children), Holy Basil, Skullcap, Coriander or Passion Flower.

My favorite general anxiety formula is a combination (tinctures) of Motherwort - 2 parts, Blue Vervain - 1 part, Fresh Oat -2 parts, Bacopa - 2 parts, Chinese Polygala - 1 part, Lavender - 1/2 part

I cannot say with any level of certainty that what I am taking has any benefit for COVID-19, I do believe that many herbs that have been shown to enhance immune competence can possibly increase our resistance (although with a novel virus, i.e., a virgin field epidemic, that may not matter as much). Many immune potentiating and immune amphoteric herbs have been used in China as preventatives for colds, influenza and other upper respiratory illnesses, including SARS (which is related to COVID-19 but is not the same virus). Some of these herbs are Astragalus, Reishi, Andrographis, Asian Ginseng, Prince Seng/Pseudostellaria, Codonopsis, Licorice or Cordyceps. Other immune potentiating herbs include Maitake, American Ginseng, Ashwagandha and Echinacea angustifolia. In traditional herbal medicine botanicals are most effective when matched to the specific constitution and energetics of the person taking them, and they are always used in complex formulas. I am taking a TCM formula known as Jade Wind Screen, as well as Andrographis tincture as possible preventatives.

### ***Are Herbs Anti-viral?***

We have heard quite a bit about anti-viral herbs. The problem with this is there are only a handful of herbs that we actually know have in vivo (in a living organism) anti-viral activity. Topically many herbs do, but in a living organism that is quite a different thing. There are many herbs that have benefits for viral diseases (colds, influenza, influenza-like illnesses, EBV, CMV, herpes), but in most cases we do not actually know why. Are they directly anti-viral? Do they inhibit viral replication? Do they enhance host immune response? Do they have some other effect or a combination of activities (very likely)? For the most part we simply do not know. So calling herbs anti-viral (again topical use is another story) is often a misnomer. The handful of herbs we do have data on include Honeysuckle flower (it contains a micro RNA that is heat stable and water soluble that inhibits viral replication), Forsythia fruits and Elderberry. In the case of Elderberry, the amount of misinformation concerning it and its supposed ability to cause a cytokine storm is astonishing. For more on this please see Donnie Yance's blog post at the end of my post. As for me I am very comfortable taking Elderberry syrup as a possible "preventative", and also a mushroom with potential "anti-viral" activity called Agarikon, but evidence that they offer any benefits in this situation are non-existent.

## ***People are looking back at the Chinese Experience with SARS and suggesting the same herbs will be effective for COVID-19***

In 2003 China experienced the SARS epidemic. While it spread to several other countries (Taiwan, Singapore) and cities (Hanoi, Toronto, Hong Kong) it was not as contagious as COVID-19 and it never became a worldwide pandemic. TCM practitioners had considerable experience treating this deadly illness and many papers were published discussing what is believed to have worked and what did not. I have included one such article at the end of this blog. There is considerable interest in both the TCM and herbal communities in using these same protocols for the related COVID-19 virus which shares approximately 82% genetic similarity to SARS. While these protocols might be useful, it is important to note that we share about 85% genetic similarity with mice! I am using this example to show that just as there is a very real difference between us and mice, the fact that SARS and COVID-19 share a great deal of DNA does not mean what would work for one will work for the other. Still, many of the herbs used for the previous epidemic are being used currently in China as part of their treatments for COVID-19 (see **What we Don't Know** above).

## ***People are talking about herbs that were effective during the 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic, will they work for COVID-19 ?***

The first thing to remember is that COVID-19 is **NOT** an influenza virus, so even if something did work for this previous pandemic, we have no evidence that these herbs will work in our present situation. The Eclectic physicians stated that they effectively utilized a number of herbs to relieve symptoms and enhance recovery in their influenza patients over 100 years ago. They used herbs such as Boneset (for fever, with trouble breathing and muscle pain), Pleurisy root (it hurts to breathe), Black Cohosh (the bones hurt and ache due to fever), as well as several highly toxic herbs that are not appropriate for self-care. While I use Eclectic specific indications today and feel something like Pleurisy root will be useful for most cases where it hurts to breathe (especially for Pleurisy), we cannot say how it will affect a case of COVID-19. I would also mention that there is no evidence that another herb used during the 1918 influenza epidemic, Lomatium (which can cause a nasty rash in some people), offers benefits for us in this situation either.

I wish I had answers for you all in these trying and scary times, I do not, nor does anyone else beyond the recommendations of the CDC, WHO or NIH. I pray we will all take this seriously, follow their recommendations, stay safe, stay well and remember we are all in this together. This is not an US vs. THEM situation, my health and your health are linked and if we help one another, take care of each other and our planet we will all be the better for it.

blessings, david

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