

Herbal Medicine to Support Healing in Celiac Disease

■ By Katolen Yardley, MNIMH

Celiac disease is an auto-immune condition, where gluten in foods triggers an immune system attack on the lining of the small intestine. Intestinal damage can prevent the digestive tract from absorbing nutrients that are important for optimal health. Celiac disease can be successfully managed by following a strict gluten-free diet. Herbal medicine, along with appropriate supplementation, can play an important role in repairing the mucous membranes that line the intestine and help to minimize both short- and long-term symptoms.

Symptoms of celiac disease may be acute and/or systemic and vary from person to person. These symptoms may include the following:

- Abdominal pain, bloating, gas or indigestion
- Constipation, diarrhea
- Lactose intolerance (this usually improves after following a gluten free diet, however, many with celiac disease do not improve until both gluten and milk are removed from the diet)
- Unexplained weight loss
- Depression or anxiety
- Fatigue and weakness
- Hair loss
- Joint pain
- Nutritional deficiencies

Specific herbs such as meadowsweet, chamomile flowers, slippery elm, lemon balm leaf, licorice, peppermint leaf and fennel seed can all be used in a clinic environment to address symptoms and support healing.

Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*): a medicinal herb with antacid and anti-inflammatory properties, known to help regulate digestive function; it offers relief of indigestion, gas and reflux, calms an overactive spastic colon and reduces excess digestive permeability.

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) flowers: an anti-inflammatory and carminative herb ideal for mucous


membrane irritation, gas and bloating; it works to ease digestive cramping and tension related to overtaxed nerves and excess stress.

Slippery elm bark powder (*Ulmus fulva*): a demulcent soothing herb consumed by mixing with water until it forms a paste, then eating it off the spoon. It reduces irritation of the digestive tract and protects the mucous membranes from excess stomach acid; helps the body absorb nutrients from food; calms down cramping, excessive peristaltic movement and wind; minimizes digestive inflammation, abdominal distension; and assists with weight gain in depleted individuals. Slippery elm powder is consumed by mixing with water until it forms a paste and is then eaten off the spoon.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*): known as a digestive relaxant is used in a clinic environment to reduce over activity of digestive system, calm an overactive digestive system and help reduce bloating and stomach distension.

Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*): an anti-inflammatory and anti-spasmodic herb ideal for digestive inflammation and cramping; it's also used as a gentle laxative for people dealing with constipation.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) and fennel seed (*Foeniculum vulgare*): known as carminative herbs or plants that contain volatile oils providing the familiar fragrant/aromatic scent of many dried herbs. Carminatives are herbs rich in volatile oils, their main action in digestion is to soothe and settle the gut wall, easing cramping, expel wind from the stomach and intestines and are gently anti spasmodic.

A clinical consultation with a medical herbalist is the best way to determine how herbal medicine can help with your symptom management. 

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