

Ayurvedic Herbs and Home Remedies for Children

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One of the eight branches of Ayurveda, known as *Bala Tantra* or *Kaumarabhritya*, deals with pediatrics and includes aspects such as the care of the newborn, infant feeding, clinical examination, dentition, management of childhood diseases, and principles of treatment and therapies, as well as childhood *samskaras* (religious rites and ceremonies to purify body, mind, and spirit). Childhood is a tender but wonderful stage of human life. Because the *dhatu*s are still immature, special care during childhood is essential. The physical development and the mental state during this period play a major role in the foundation of the rest of a person's life.

Ayurveda views and classifies childhood ailments from their etiopathogenesis and suggests management of disease according to their cause, signs and symptoms, and possible complications. Such a complex approach is out of the scope of this article, so I will just go over some home remedies, Ayurvedic herbs, and herbal compounds that can be safely used in most cases of common childhood concerns, as well as other medicines typically used by Ayurvedic practitioners.

A Safe and Holistic Approach with Ayurveda

In our modern world, particularly in highly developed countries, it is easy to lose touch with the healing power within each one of us. From the moment a child is born she is literally injected with the belief that her immune system is not capable of doing its job properly without some artificial means like vaccinations and other drugs. Furthermore, nowadays the treatment for common childhood ailments consists mainly of allopathic drugs such as antibiotics. Of course, there may be times when such drugs are necessary, but all too often they could be substituted by a safer and more natural approach. Ayurveda has much to offer in the way of gentle and effective health care and disease prevention for children through diet and lifestyle, as well as the use of medicinal herbs and spices. For thousands of years herbs have been successfully used for addressing a wide variety of childhood disorders. Many herbs can strengthen the immune system and support the health of children of all ages in a safe and holistic manner.

One of the most important factors to consider for the health of a newborn is the health of the parents. For this reason, Ayurveda recommends that both parents undergo *panchakarma* before they wish to conceive a child. This helps to prevent their *vikruti* (current state of health) from being passed on to the baby. Once conception is achieved, the mother should be relaxed during pregnancy, reading spiritual books, chanting mantras, eating a doshic diet, receiving regular *abhyanga*, doing gentle and restorative *yogasana*, and meditating.

From conception onward, Ayurveda places great emphasis on post partum care for the mother to balance *vata* and promote health and vitality in her, as well as to ensure the healthy development of the fetus. After birth, both the newborn infant and the mother are to be cared for throughout the first forty days with the utmost attention. Traditionally, these duties consist of daily oil massage, bathing, and other herbal therapies. Even today in much of rural India and Nepal there is a wealth of wisdom on birthing and infant's health care that lays in the hands of midwives and grandmothers, even though many restrictions have been placed upon them.

Ayurvedic Herbs for Colic and Constipation

Because food is our first and foremost form of nutrition, it should be considered our primary medicine. In Ayurveda many common fruits, vegetables, and culinary spices are used to help with a variety of childhood health complaints without the need for any other treatment. For instance, constipation in young children can be corrected by drinking a cup of warm milk before bedtime with one teaspoon of *ghee* added to it. Likewise, a good measure consists in including in the diet foods that have a natural laxative effect such as soaked raisins or dates, honey, bran, sesame seeds, mango, papaya, grapes, and fresh figs. Furthermore, encouraging proper eating habits and food combining when possible, sufficient water intake, high quality oils, and providing plenty of high fiber foods can be helpful in the prevention of constipation.

In the case of infants, the mother can apply a small amount of castor oil to her nipple before breastfeeding. For babies with intestinal colic, mix equal parts of Cumin, Fennel, and Coriander powder and add ½ to 1 teaspoon of this mixture to a cup of hot water, let it steep for 15 to 20 minutes, then strain well. This tea can be given as needed to correct *vata* in the colon. The mother can also drink it to reduce the qualities of *vata* in her breast milk. In the case of infants, it is useful to administer the tea with a baby medicine dropper, available in most baby supply sections, and dilute it a little, if needed, to make it more palatable. There are a variety of Ayurvedic herbs and formulas that can be quite effective for constipation in toddlers and children, such as *Triphala churna*, *Sat isabgol*, *Gandarva haritaki*, or *Avipattikara churna*, but care should be taken to choose the one that is most appropriate for the overall condition and constitution of the child. Other typical formulas used for colic and intestinal disorders are *Eladi churna* and *Hingwastak churna*. It is good to keep in mind that a good dosage for children is about one third the normal adult dosage, and even less for infants. Allopathic laxatives and strong laxative herbs should be avoided.

Treating Colds and Fever with Ayurveda

Treating the common cold or flu in children with herbal and dietary guidelines is an effective means of supporting and strengthening their immune system. Generally speaking, the common cold is often associated with the cold and damp qualities of *kapha* and *ama* (toxins), which cause symptoms such as low appetite, nasal or chest congestion, malaise, and sometimes mild to moderate fever. First and foremost, the child should rest and drink plenty of warm liquids to support the *agni* (digestive fire) and the elimination of *ama*. If their appetite is low, because of diminished *agni*, it is best not to force food upon them, as this could contribute to the formation of *ama*.

Warm ginger tea is a good remedy to kindle *agni* and when combined with equal parts Yashti madhu (Licorice root) and a little raw honey it helps liquefy and expectorate phlegm. Because of the possible link between honey and botulism in infants, only high quality, organic raw honey should be used. If there is chest congestion or restricted breathing, then warm *Mahanarayan* or sesame oil, or *ghee* with a pinch of rock or black salt, can be massaged onto the chest followed by a eucalyptus steam inhalation. *Tulsi* (Holy basil) works wonders for soothing coughs, decongesting the lungs and sinuses, as well as lowering a fever by promoting sweating. *Tulsi* tea can be prepared by adding 1 teaspoon of *Tulsi* powder to 1 cup of hot water. This can also be given before bedtime to break a fever when nothing else works. Other typical Ayurvedic formulas for the practitioner to consider in the treatment of common cold, flu, and upper respiratory infections are *Sanjivani guti*, *Tribuvankirti ras*, *Sitopaladi churna*, *Talisadi churna*, and *Lavangadi vati*,

Jwara (fever) is the body's natural way of burning *ama*. It is important not to suppress it whenever possible, although fevers above 102 degrees should be lowered and kept within safe limits. A remarkable home remedy for lowering fever consists in rubbing fresh onion juice to the child's navel

region while applying a cool cloth to the forehead to protect the brain. Also, pomegranate or fresh orange juice is nutritious and effective to control fever, but drinking too much can increase *ama* and orange juice may provoke *pitta* if it is too sour and acidic, so it should be diluted if taken frequently. The compound *Mahasudarshan* is also very useful for high fevers. Because of its strong bitter taste, it is best given in tablet form, in doses of 250 to 500 mg with warm water.

Ayurvedic Herbs for Skin Problems

Skin care for children is a topic worth mentioning. First, I'm sure every parent of an infant would like to know a simple trick for dealing with diaper rash. One of the best remedies for this is to add 1 to 2 teaspoons of *Kumari* (Aloe vera) juice into the baby's drinking water. This helps to relieve excess *pitta* in the body and can soothe the rash relatively fast. This works great as a preventative or along with topical treatment. *Kumari* juice is also a good *rasayana* for the entire body and can be given daily in small doses throughout the early years of life to tonify the tissues and organs, aid digestion and elimination, as well as to enhance the health of the *rasa* and *rakta dhatu*, and *twak*, or the top layer of the skin.

Rashes such as eczema and psoriasis are quite common amongst children, and all too often are treated with cortisone creams that merely suppress the symptoms. This approach can cause the problem to worsen over time. Ayurveda views such rashes as relating mainly to high *pitta* and *ama* in the liver, plasma, and blood tissue. Although *pitta* is the primary *dosha* considered in such conditions, the characteristics of the rash may vary depending on whether other *doshas* are present. If *vata* is involved there can be much dryness, scaling, and cracking. When *kapha* is present, then there may be more swelling and weeping. There is often an immunological and emotional component connected to skin conditions that should also be considered and addressed.

The most basic treatment consists of dietary restrictions, which include avoiding excessive intake of salty, pungent, and sour tasting foods, acidic fruits, as well as deep fried, fermented, and hot spicy foods. Bitter herbs such as *Neem*, *Manjistha*, *Haridra* (Turmeric), and *Guduchi* have an affinity to the roots of *rasa* and *rakta vaha srotas*, the liver and spleen, and are commonly used for such ailments. Cooling nervines like *Brahmi* (Gotu kola) as well as *Jatamansi*, both of which also have alterative properties, are perfect for cooling and calming the mind, as well as clearing heat from the blood and liver. Traditional compounds such as *Kaishore guggulu*, *Tikta gritam*, *Maha manjistadi kwatha*, and *Panchnimba churna* are also useful, but treatment should always consider the *prakruti*, other secondary *doshas* involved, and reduce any aggravating factors.

In my experience, local treatment with oils and creams will not cure the condition but can provide some relief of itching, scaling, redness, and painful cracking. Good oils for topical application are *Neem* leaf oil in a coconut base, *Tikta gritam*, *Bakuchi* oil, and castor oil.

It is worth noting that it can be almost impossible to convince children to take herbal formulas in tea form, especially bitter herbs, so powdered herbs can be encapsulated in single "O" size vege capsules or taken in tablet form (which can be broken in small pieces to facilitate swallowing). Another "possibility" to mask the bitter taste of herbs is to mix them with a little fruit juice or a sweet substance such as maple syrup, which is also *pitta* pacifying. Some Ayurvedic herbal formulas can also be found in syrup form.

Treating Parasites and Worms with Ayurveda

Another health concern that is common in children is krimi (worms and parasite infestations). Symptoms include constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain, flatulence, anemia, anorexia, increased appetite, pica (tendency to eat unusual or strange foods), and itching of the anus. The causes are many and include eating contaminated foods and drinks, or foods that are difficult to digest, poor eating habits, or contact with animal feces and uncleanness, to name a few. Ayurveda views that krimi are born of excess dosha and ama, and that developing some simple healthy habits can help prevent such situations. A few good tips are to avoid eating excess sweets, fried foods, fast foods, uncooked grain flour such as cookie or bread dough, and raw jaggary. It is also important to have children wash their hands after touching any animals, including their own pets, and especially before eating.

A simple household remedy for worms like thread, pin, and round worms, is to take 3 to 5 drops of fresh onion juice diluted in one teaspoon of water 3 times daily. Another good worm remedy consists of mixing equal parts of Neem and Vidanga that can be easily administered in single "O" size capsules. Two capsules taken twice daily is a good dose for children. A general herbal compound is made with equal parts Neem, Vidanga, Kutaja, and Shardunika. One or two single "O" size capsules of this formula can be taken twice daily before meals. Also, a pinch of Hing (Asafoetida) mixed with one to two teaspoons of rapadura (dehydrated organic sugar cane juice) or sucanat can be eaten half an hour before food.

Some typical medicines used by Ayurvedic practitioners for parasitic conditions are Kutajarishta, Vidangarishta, Kutaja parpati, and Krimikuthar ras. Older kids (7 to 12 years old) can take 20 grams of rapadura or sucanat in the morning, followed after 10 minutes by Ajwain (celery seeds) and salt (2 grams of celery seeds per one gram of salt) with warm water. This recipe eliminates all types of worms. It is important to note that because treatment of krimi should be continued for at least a month to prevent re-infestation, it is good to have the guidance of a skilled practitioner.

Rejuvenating and Nourishing the Mind with Ayurveda

Learning is a large part of being a child, so we should not forget about herbs that rejuvenate the mind. One of the most common rasayana herbs for the brain is Shankapushpi. Shankapushpi is a popular tridoshic herb for promoting memory and intelligence, and is commonly prepared in a syrup form for this purpose. It is also used to treat depression, psychosis, and epilepsy. In the case of children diagnosed with ADD, it can be combined with Brahmi.

Brahmi (Gotu kola or Bacopa, aka *Herpestis monnieri*), is also worth mentioning when it comes to the mind. Brahmi means "cosmic consciousness." Its name is also associated with Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, because it is one of the best nervine tonics for rejuvenating the mind. It is used for addressing a wide variety of mental and nervous disorders. Gotu kola is tri-doshic and Bacopa has a heating energy. Both herbs facilitate the balance of tarpaka kapha, sadhaka pitta, and prana vayu, the doshas present in the brain. They can be used alone or with other herbs such as Jatamansi, Shankapushpi, Vacha, Ashwagandha, or Jyotishmati for improving memory.

For speech impediments, these two herbs combine well with equal parts of Vacha (*Calamus*). A common formula used for treating speech disorders, as well as a wide variety of vata disorders of the mind, nervous, and digestive system, is Saraswata churna. It contains herbs like Ashwagandha, Vacha, Shanka pushpi, Ajwan, Cumin, and Rock salt. It is safe for children and its flavor is somewhat palatable too. Saraswata churna is a good example of the truly holistic approach that Ayurveda takes in compounding herbs to address the many qualities of a dosha and its possible and common effects on the entire system. It has herbs that have an affinity to all of the organs, dhatus, and srotamsi that relate to vata dosha. Other typical Ayurvedic medicines to consider for rejuvenating the mind and the

nervous system are Brahmi vati, Smriti sagar ras, Brahma rasayana, Ashwagandharishta, and Brahmi ghee.

There is no end to the variety and usefulness of Ayurvedic herbs and home remedies for children. Most herbs are safe and very effective when used skillfully, constitutionally, and in appropriate doses. Before resorting to stronger herbal based medicines it is best to use whole foods and simple herbs and spices. Often times less is more and the right medicine in small amounts can do wonders. Therefore, achieving doshic balance, promoting healthy habits, and strengthening immunity and agni in early childhood can set the foundation for optimal growth and development, and overall health in the future.

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