

Chamomile: Use in Pregnancy and Pediatrics

by Jim Duke, PhD

Knowing that this issue of the *JAHG* was to focus on pediatric issues, this geriatric reductionistic botanist decided to talk about pediatric uses of chamomile. Let me state from the front, that I will flit from flower to flower, dancing back and forth between German (annual) and Roman (perennial) chamomiles, because, within my limited experience, their flowers can be used generically as gentle food pharmaceuticals.

Prenatal use

Martha Libster, RN (Libster, 2002) notes that chamomile has been used classically, usually in small doses, in pregnancy to relieve nervous twitching and false labor pains accompanied by restlessness. If pain goes away in early twinges of labor, upon drinking chamomile, it indicates false labor. BUT “excessive amounts should be avoided in early pregnancy because of some minor emmenagogue properties of the whole plant (not the flower). Chamomile is useful in later months as an anxiolytic. Chamomile creams or teas applied topically can help decrease local inflammation and enhance healing in women who suffer skin changes during pregnancy (Libster).”

Puerperial use

Mentioning *Melissa* tea first, Certified Lactation Consultant, Sheila Humphrey, RN, notes that lemon balm, the “gladdening herb,” can help in overcoming postpartum depressions. “A couple of cups of fragrant lemon balm tea can lift the spirits, and so can a number of other teas: chamomile, lavender, and rose. Blessed thistle tea (one or two cups per day) can help relieve postpartum depression, though in larger amounts it may increase the milk supply (Humphrey, 2003). And for the nursing mom with sore nipples, Humphrey suggests

rinses or poultices of chamomile, marshmallow, and pot marigold, while Libster suggests topical chamomile lotion for sore nipples in nursing mothers.

Pediatric use

Humphrey advises for the colicky baby, a warm bath with chamomile (or lavender) flower infusions, enough plant to barely color the water, and straining out the plant material. A warm towel soaked in warm chamomile tea may be wrapped about the baby’s midsection. “Catnip and chamomile tea are also effective with colic and may not increase your milk supply as much as the seeds” (anise, fennel, caraway, cumin and dill). She gives it close to her highest safety rating (“A”), but hedges a bit (see Safety below), scoring it “A/B” saying rarely allergenic. Like any cautious person, she advises, as do I, of the possibility of allergic reactions, rare though they be (p 42).

Readers of this journal will be familiar with the Eclectic respect for the chamomiles. Felter and Lloyd (1898) mention chamomile (German) as “an important remedy with us, particularly in affections of young children.” The *Matricaria* patient is described as restless, irritable, discontent, and impatient, and, if a child, is only appeased when continually carried. Libster says chamomile is used in minor pediatric eye ailments, and is given in spoonful doses as a sedative, especially during teething, for earache, stomach distress, and infantile convulsions. With good reason it is often given to restless children at bedtime. Warm wet chamomile compresses are used in pediatric dermatoses, e.g. diaper rash and eczema. Diaper rash is often treated with full or sitz baths in chamomile tea. Chamomile creams have been considered as effective as hydrocortisone topically in inflammation.



James Duke received his PhD in Botany from the University of North Carolina, moving on to postdoctoral studies at Washington University and the Missouri Botanical Garden where he assumed professor and curator duties, respectively. Dr. Duke spends a significant amount of his time exploring the ecology and culture of the Amazonian Rain Forest. In addition to a distinguished 30-year career with the United States Department of Agriculture, Dr. Duke sits on the board of directors and advisory councils of numerous organizations involved in plant medicine and the rainforest. He is also an accomplished musician, poet, and songwriter.

Too many children are diagnosed with ADD these days. Chamomile would be an essential component, with catnip, lemon balm, linden, peppermint, and valerian, to taste, after learning the grandkids' taste preferences, for children with true behavioral problems.

Safety

Dennis Awang is co-principal-investigator with Albert Leung of an SBIR grant covering development of a preparation for clinical trials. Awang notes that most of the 50 or so reports of allergic reactions to chamomile were to other species, not due to *Matricaria chamomile*. The most serious allergies seem to be to *Anthemis cotula*, which can contain up to 7.3% anthecotulid. Awang concludes, "Drink your chamomile (German or Hungarian) tea with peace of mind" (Awang 2003).

Having not yet seen the 3rd edition of Leung's Encyclopedia of *Common Natural Ingredients* or the 2nd edition of Lewis and Elvin-Lewis' *Medical Botany*, I wagered in advance that the former would be positive on chamomile as safe while the latter would be more negative. Of course, Leung is working on a chamomile product while Dr Lewis is highly allergic himself. I'll still advise chamomile caution for those, like Dr Lewis, prone to allergies. I think apigenin is the most important among the antiallergic and antiinflammatory

compounds in chamomile, at least in my database. But there are several other antiallergic chemicals in the chamomiles. German chamomile contains also azulene, chamazulene, cis-en-yn-dicycloether, herniarin, kaempferol, luteolin, quercetin and rutin. The quercetin (probably ubiquitous, i.e., in all plants) is also reportedly antianaphylactic. I'll go out on a limb, and suggest that chamomile might even be considered for treating allergy.

Experienced clinical herbalists, like most readers of this journal, don't need to know which phytochemicals might contribute to the proven actions of chamomile. There's a private corner of my phytochemical database at the USDA where you can ask what phytochemical reported in any herb therein reportedly contribute to the alleviation, cure, deceleration, or prophylaxis. Here's the URL: <http://www.ars-grin.gov/duke/dev/all.html>.

References

- Awang DVC 2003, Chamomile allergy and alleged anaphylaxis Leung's *(Chinese) Herb News*. No.40 (Jul/Aug/Sep), p. 2
- Felter HW & Lloyd JU 1898 (reprint 1983), *King's American Dispensatory*. Eclectic Medical Publications, Sandy, OR
- Humphrey S 2003, *The Nursing Mother's Herbal*. Fairview Press, Minneapolis, MN
- Libster M 2002, *Delmar's Integrative Herb Guide for Nurses*. Delmar-Thomson Learnings, Albany, NY



Thanks to our Sponsors

- Bastyr University
- Innate Response Formulas
- BioSan Laboratories, Inc.
- Herbalist & Alchemist, Inc.
- David Winston
- Planetary Formulas
- Brant Secunda
- Dance of the Deer Foundation
- Shaman Chocolates
- Tai Sophia Institute
- Vitality Works, Inc.
- Mitch Coven