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What are those herbs in her Pregnancy Tea Blend?

Midwives Herbal - Part One

By Demetria Clark

Midwives often have knowledge of herbs. But being a midwife and knowing about a few herbs doesn't make a midwife an herbalist. In my practice of running an herbal school and having pregnant clients I am often shocked at suggestions my clients are given by friends, family members and care providers.

Using herbs in pregnancy can be a very safe alternative to over-the-counter products, but there are dangers. One danger is the American mind-set that "if one is good, four are better." This is not true with herbs or over-the-counter drugs. Another danger is the idea that all herbs are safe. This is not true, and combining all herbs is not recommended. An additional danger is the idea that taking one herb class makes you an herbalist. Being an herbalist is more than one course or apprenticeship. It is courses, practice and experience. In addition, a person who takes a class through a company that sells products is a sales representative, not an herbalist. Such a person only knows about products, not plants.

Below I "break apart" the herbs commonly used in herbal pregnancy teas and tincture blends as a reference piece for the midwife who is not an herbalist:

Ingredients: Spearmint leaf, raspberry leaf, strawberry leaf, nettle leaf, rose hip, fennel seed, lemongrass leaf, alfalfa leaf, lemon verbena.

Spearmint Leaf-Mentha spicata

Spearmint is a favorite with pregnant mothers because it relieves nausea and alleviates morning sickness. A gentler alternative to Peppermint (mentha piperita), it has been traditionally used for nausea, gas and indigestion. Spearmint can also be used to decrease muscle spasms in the stomach. It has a good flavor, masking the earthy taste of some herbal teas that some people do not like. Spearmint is high in vitamins C and A. Contraindications: None known.

Raspberry Leaf-Rubus idaeus

Raspberry leaf has an ancient tradition of use in pregnancy to sustain and tone the tissue of the womb, support contractions and check hemorrhage during labor. As an astringent it may be used in a wide range of loose conditions (mucus, needing an astringent action), including diarrhea and leucorrhoea. It is also valuable for reducing mouth problems such as ulcers, bleeding gums and inflammation. As a gargle it is beneficial for sore throats. Raspberry is also very rich in iron, calcium and vitamin E.

Contraindications: Raspberry leaf has no known contraindications. Some in the midwifery community say it shouldn't be used in early pregnancy or in cases with a history of miscarriage. This has been neither proven to be true or untrue. However, the only time I have seen miscarriage result from raspberry leaf use is as follows:

"Conventional medical opinion believes that raspberry leaf can actually cause miscarriage or premature labor. They say that this belief is based upon a 1970 study in which injections of raspberry leaf extract caused contractions in strips of human uteri between 10 and 16 weeks of pregnancy."

Taking the herb in extract form rather than tea is not proper use. Would this have happened with another extract or even water? My belief is that in this case, miscarriage was going to happen whether this person drank the tea or not. According to the National Institute of Health, 15% of all pregnancies end in miscarriage. To be on the safe side, I would suggest that an at-risk client wait until the second trimester to drink the tea.

Strawberry Leaf-F. virginiana

Strawberry leaf is extremely rich in antioxidants and has a very high vitamin C content. It is a mild astringent. Contraindications: None known, but not to be used in case of strawberry allergy.

Nettles-Urtica dioica

Nettles have traditionally been used to strengthen and support the whole body. They contain potassium, magnesium and vitamins A, B and C. The plant is rich in chlorophyll and is a high-quality source of beta-carotene, tannins, iron, calcium, phosphates, silica and various other minerals. Nettles are a great food source and wonderful in pregnancy and nursing. When I recommend an herbal for nutritional value I always suggest nettles and raspberry leaf.

Contraindications: Nettles have been shown to enhance the effect of diclofenac, so please seek the advice of a health provider if using diclofenac. Nettles are contraindicated in cases of fluid retention from decreased renal function and reduced cardiac function.

Rose Hips-Rosa canina

This is one of my favorite herbs. Rose hips taste great and are a nutritional powerhouse. Rose hips contain vitamins C and E, pectin, carotenoids and flavonoids. Rose hips have a gentle laxative effect, which can assist with constipation. This herb is often added for its nutritional value and taste.

Contraindications: None known with proper dosage. Proper dosage is 3-4 cups of tea a day. Tea dosage is 1 cup of water to 1 teaspoon dried herb, 2 teaspoons fresh herb.

Fennel-Foeniculum vulgare

Fennel is an exceptional stomach and intestinal remedy. It relieves flatulence, while at the same time stimulating the digestion and appetite. Fennel is also beneficial for milk production. Fennel has a sweet mellow flavor.

Contraindication: None known for the herb, but the essential oil should not be used during pregnancy. If one is allergic to celery an allergic reaction may occur.

Lemongrass-Cymbopogon citrates

Lemongrass is commonly added because of its assistance with flatulence, stomach cramps and digestion. It is also recommended for mild states of agitation. Good-tasting herb. Contraindications: None known for the herb. Do not use the essential oil during pregnancy.

Lemon Verbena-Aloysia triphylla

Lemon Verbena is often used for nerves, agitation and digestion. It is also traditionally used in conditions of insomnia, hemorrhoids, varicose veins and constipation. The plant often serves as a flavoring in medicinal teas. Contraindications: None known.

Alfalfa-Medicago sativa

Alfalfa is one of the most nutritious foods. It is a gentle diuretic and is great for promoting appetite. Alfalfa is rich in vitamin K. The plant is so rich in calcium that the ashes of its leaves are almost 99% pure calcium. Alfalfa may be beneficial for reducing cholesterol. Up to 50% protein, alfalfa has a high quantity of beta-carotene, chlorophyll and octacosanol. Other ingredients are: saponins, sterols, flavonoids, coumarins, alkaloids, acids, vitamins (A, B1, B6, B12, C, D, E, K, niacin, pantothenic acid, biotin, folic acid), amino acids, sugars, minerals (calcium, K, P, magnesium, Fe, Zinc, Cu), trace elements and other nutrients. Alfalfa is great for overall nutrition and health. All ages, from children to seniors, can use alfalfa. Contraindications-None known

Herbs are safe when used properly. Proper use requires proper education. Don't look to one book for all of your herbal information. Try reading works by various authors. This will strengthen your knowledge, and the books will compensate for one another's weaknesses.

Some good books to start with are:

Wise Women Herbal for the Childbearing Year, by Susun S. Weed

The Natural Pregnancy Book: Herbs, Nutrition and Other Holistic Choices, by Aviva Jill Romm

Naturally Healthy Babies & Children: A Commonsense Guide to Herbal Remedies, by Aviva Jill Romm

Herbal Healing for Women: Simple Home Remedies for Women of All Ages, by Rosemary Gladstar

Demetria Clark runs Heart of Herbs Herbal School in Vermont (www.heartofherbs.com) and is a childbirth doula. She lives in Vermont with her husband and two sons. She is also the author of the upcoming book Herb Mother—a Mother's Herbal Guide and Source Book for Natural Life.