



P.O. Box 144345 Austin, TX 78714-4345 • 512.926.4900 • Fax: 512.926.2345 • www.herbalgram.org

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Christina Chase, MS, RD
Heather S Oliff, PhD
Michelle Schuman Sanger

Jill Hoppe
Diane Graves, MPH, RD

Mariann Garner-Wizard
Densie Webb, PhD

Editor Mark Blumenthal
Funding/Administration Wayne Silverman, PhD

Managing Editor Jan Veenstra
Production George Solis/Kathleen Coyne

FILE: ■ **Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*)**

HC 011527 - 209

Date: March 22, 2002

RE: **Vervain – Traditional Herb’s Many Uses Documented**

Owen N. *Verbena officinalis* L. Vervain. *British Journal of Phytotherapy*. 2001;5:114-117.

Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) is one of approximately 800 species of the family Verbenaceae, and is indigenous to the UK. The leaves, flowering heads, and roots have been used for centuries for a variety of medicinal purposes, but little research has been done on its pharmacology. In addition to its physiologic effects, verbena was endowed with magical properties by the ancient Druids, Egyptians, and Romans, who used it in various rites and incantations as well as in magical charms. This article reviews the historical and therapeutic uses of this ancient traditional herb.

The article reports the lack of human studies; most information available on verbena comes from clinical observation and reports of historical uses. In vivo animal studies have revealed galactagogue properties, and extracts of the vervain fruit have been used to treat dysmenorrhea and to stimulate lactation. Uterine stimulation has also been documented, as well as antihypertensive and analgesic properties. The disinfectant action and alkalizing effect of vervain has shown antilithic and diuretic action in rats. A recent in vitro study on intact human breast cancer cells showed that vervain extracts can bind to cell receptors for estrogen and progesterone.

Clinically, verbena is known as a calming restorative for debilitated conditions as well as a stimulant for the liver and digestion; many cultures have considered it a heal-all, and it has been used to treat ailments of several body systems. Claims made for its actions on the nervous system include strengthening the nervous system while relaxing tension and stress, diminishing symptoms of headache, migraine, and insomnia, improving depression and melancholy following illness, restoring normal energy levels during convalescence, and relieving seizure, hysteria, and nervous exhaustion. Actions on the digestive system are attributed to the bitter content of vervain, which is said to stimulate the liver and enhance digestion, thereby treating lethargy, depression, headaches, and irritability. While helpful in inflammation of the gall bladder and jaundice, vervain can cause vomiting in high doses. Musculoskeletal effects include antispasmodic and relaxing effects on the viscera, probably due to the parasympathetic action of verbenalin. This antispasmodic action promotes its use in the treatment of bronchitis and asthma. Vervain acts as a diaphoretic when given as a hot infusion. Tannins in vervain have an astringent property useful for gum disease, dental caries, and mouth ulcers when used as a mouthwash, and as a skin lotion it can be used to treat sores, wounds, and insect bites. Vervain is used as a remedy for fluid retention and gout as well as kidney stones and gravel due to its diuretic properties. Menstrual problems, including amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome, and menopausal mood disorders, are also reported to have been treated with verbena. Vervain should be avoided in pregnancy but can be used in labor to strengthen contractions and in lactation.

Other species of *Verbena* have similar varied and scientifically undocumented actions, such as an antidote for specific poisons, a treatment for syphilis, and to slow or stop severe bleeding from wounds.

Vervain can be used as an infusion, extract, or tincture. While generally tolerated, some allergic reactions have been reported.

The author states that vervain has a great deal of therapeutic value, citing its gentle, tonic action as well as its powerful effect. Its uses throughout the ages for a variety of disorders are attributed primarily to its bitter and stimulating effect on the liver and other organs, as well as its relaxing effect on the nervous system. Many of the clinical applications of vervain are presented in “healer” rather than scientific terms: “tonic,” “stimulating,” “restoration,” “cleansing.” While there is minimal speculation regarding the specific biochemical and physiological basis for vervain’s purported effects in humans, this article covers the traditional uses of the herb and suggests that vervain is safe for use in many conditions. The author urges research on the pharmacology of vervain, and states that the herb will continue to be of great use to phytotherapists.

— Diane Graves, MPH, RD

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