



# HerbClip™

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**FILE: ■Nervine Herbs  
■Anxiety Disorders  
■Depression**

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**RE: Lesser Known Herbs Used to Treat Anxiety Disorders**

Abascal K, Yarnell E. Nervine herbs for treating anxiety. *Altern Complement Ther.* December 2004;10(6):309-315.

Anxiety disorders are common in many Western countries, and conventional drugs like benzodiazepines are often prescribed to relieve anxiety. However, these drugs have worrisome short-term and long-term side effects. Nervine herbs (herbs that quiet nervous excitement) have a long history of traditional use in relieving anxiety, insomnia, and mild depression. With the exception of St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), kava (*Piper methysticum*), and valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), there is little published research on the safety and efficacy of nervine herbs. The purpose of this article was to review the available research and explain how the lesser-known nervine herbs are commonly used in practice.

California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) is used for its mild analgesic and calming effects. Unlike the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*), it has no narcotic effects. Animal studies indicate California poppy tea reduces anxiety, acts as a mild analgesic, and helps prevent drug-induced memory loss. Most herbal practitioners combine lower doses of California poppy with other nervines to relieve anxiety. Researchers studied a combination of California poppy, hawthorn flower (*Crataegus laevigata*), and magnesium in 264 people with mild to moderate anxiety. Those taking the herb mixture had significantly improved anxiety symptoms after three months compared to those taking placebo. Hawthorn is primarily used for heart conditions and is not usually considered a nervine. However, it may help alleviate anxiety symptoms such as heart palpitations and increased blood pressure.

One of the most popular nervines is the immature seed of oats (*Avena sativa*). While it is used for acute and chronic anxiety and for headaches related to exhaustion or overwork, the German Commission E concluded that its effectiveness has not been established.

Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) is used in calming and sleep formulas. The German Commission E has approved its use for nervous restlessness. A liquid extract of passionflower was found to be as effective as the drug oxazepam in a study of 36 patients with generalized anxiety disorder. Animal studies show that a passionflower constituent reverses dependence on psychotropic drugs, including morphine, nicotine, and Valium.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is often used as a mild mood elevator and calming herb in people with anxiety. It has been shown to improve attention and calmness in healthy volunteers. Lemon balm tincture was also found to improve cognitive function and decrease agitation in people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease.

The leaves and flowers of vervain (*Verbena officinalis*) are used to reduce agitation and anger. The German Commission E concluded there is not enough evidence to establish the effectiveness of vervain for nervous conditions, and there are no published clinical trials of this nervine herb.

Lavender leaf (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and linden flower (*Tilia cordata*) are two herbs with sedative effects. Lavender is often added to nervine formulas but is rarely used alone. The German Commission E has approved the use of lavender flowers for mood disturbances such as restlessness, insomnia, and nervous intestinal discomfort. Linden flowers have a history of use as sedatives and tranquilizers. Today, small doses are used to calm nervous people and reduce high blood pressure, and larger doses are used to promote restful sleep. Animal studies indicate that linden has antistress, sedative, and hypotensive (blood pressure lowering) effects.

The authors believe that nervine herb formulas may be a safe and effective remedy for people with mild or moderate anxiety and that prescription drugs should be reserved for people with more serious and persistent anxiety disorders. Given the increasing incidence of anxiety disorders and the long history of traditional use of nervine herbs, clinical research to evaluate their safety and efficacy should be a high priority.

—Heather S. Oliff, Ph.D.

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