



# HerbClip™

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**FILE: ■ Arrhythmias  
■ Irregular Heartbeats**

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**RE: Traditional Herb Use for Arrhythmias**

Yarnell E, Abascal K. Botanicals for regulating heart rhythms. *Alternative & Complementary Therapies* 2003 June:125-129.

Clinicians frequently encounter patients with cardiac arrhythmias (irregular heartbeats). Antiarrhythmia drugs can have adverse side effects, and patients and clinicians often seek out botanical options. The purpose of this article is to review herbs that can regulate heart rhythm and to discuss the clinical uses of these herbs.

Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*) is used for minor arrhythmias that are not caused by underlying heart disease. This herb has a sedative effect and may reduce anxiety. It has been recommended for patients whose heart palpitations are caused by hyperthyroidism. Although the active constituents of motherwort have not been characterized, there are no known contraindications or safety issues. Motherwort is typically administered as a tea made from fresh leaves and flowers and consumed three times a day.

Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*), skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*), jujube (*Ziziphus jujuba*), and kava (*Piper methysticum*) are other choices for treating minor arrhythmias. These herbs are less specific than motherwort, but can help normalize abnormal heart rhythms caused by anxiety, stress, or other minor conditions. Most have long histories of safe use and adverse effects are generally not reported in clinical trials. The authors express the opinion that the evidence linking kava consumption to liver damage is very limited and weak and that kava is a beneficial herb that can and should be used safely.

Night-blooming cereus (*Selenicereus grandiflorus*) is traditionally used in patients with general arrhythmias. It is believed to be useful for treating palpitations related to menopause and anxiety, and it may be helpful for patients with congestive heart failure. Little is known about the active constituents, and there are no published clinical trials. A fresh plant tincture of the stem and flower is typically taken three times a day.

Scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) is a relatively stronger antiarrhythmia herb. It contains sparteine and other alkaloids that are similar to quinine. Scotch broom has been used to help regulate heart rhythm in patients with congestive heart failure or heart attack. Although there are no published clinical trials, the pharmacology of sparteine is well characterized. It is metabolized by cytochrome P2D6 enzymes in the liver and should not be given with drugs that inhibit cytochrome P2D6 function or with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. It should also not be used during pregnancy or in patients with hypertension. A tincture made from fresh or dry leaf and flower material can be taken three times a day.

Rauwolfia (a.k.a. Indian snakeroot; *Rauwolfia serpentina*) is a potent and specific antiarrhythmic herb. It contains a combination of alkaloids that prevent several types of arrhythmia. Side effects of rauwolfia include nasal stuffiness and constipation, and the herb is reported to have many drug interactions and contraindications. A tincture made from the whole plant should be taken three times a day.

Lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*) is another strong herb for treating more serious arrhythmias. Its active constituents include glycosides and flavonoids. Patients taking lily-of-the-valley should be advised to increase their consumption of potassium-rich fruits and vegetables to guard against potassium loss. This herb should not be taken with potassium-wasting drugs. Lily-of-the-valley is typically taken three times a day as a fresh plant tincture; patients should not exceed the dosage recommended by a qualified health care practitioner.

Hawthorn (*Crataegus laevigata*) is the best-known herb for treating heart ailments. It is recommended as a chronic treatment to prevent and treat nearly all types of arrhythmias. In clinical trials, hawthorn reduced tachycardiac (rapid heartbeat) arrhythmias in patients with congestive heart failure. There are no known adverse effects or contraindications for hawthorn. The leaves, flowers, and berries of the plant are used and the herb can be taken three times a day as a tea, tincture, or standardized extract.

In summary, hawthorn is recommended as a gentle tonic for prevention and treatment of all arrhythmias. Mild arrhythmias not related to heart disease can be treated with simple sedative herbs such as motherwort and skullcap. Night-blooming cereus, Scotch broom, rauwolfia, and lily-of-the-valley offer more potent, but potentially more toxic, options and require careful dosing and monitoring. The authors caution that only highly-trained clinicians should attempt therapy in patients with serious heart conditions and clinicians with little experience should refer patients to a cardiologist.

—Heather S. Oliff, Ph.D.

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