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## Herbal Allies for Weight Loss

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**PLEASE READ:** *The information handout has not been approved by the FDA and does not in any way intend to diagnose or prescribe. Always consult with your health practitioner before taking any remedy.*

**Above this, I also recommend that you...**

1. *Research an herb in at least three good sources before ingesting it (see website for sources),*
2. *Listen to your body/intuition to determine if an herb resonates or doesn't resonate with you.*
3. *Take proper steps to ensure that any wildcrafted or cultivated plant is what you think it is, AND*
4. *Check with your pharmacist for herb-drug interactions if you take prescriptions.*

### HOW HERBS CAN HELP:

When I worked the supplement aisles of our local natural food store, customers constantly asked for a magic pill to lose weight. My answer was always the same: “The ones that are safe don’t work well. The ones that work well usually aren’t safe.”

That still rings true. Our best path to weight loss—in terms of success and whole health—is achieved through proper diet and exercise, no matter how much we don’t want to hear it. Glance through the clinical studies and you’ll be rather disappointed by our “magic pills,” yet we never lose hope. Whenever *Women’s World* or Oprah raved about a new miracle weight loss supplement, requests flooded the stores until even the suppliers were sold out. Customers would happily go home with their bag of diet goodies, no matter what the ticket price. But, in the end, no one came back for more.

That doesn’t mean we have to go it alone, though. Many herbs provide wonderful *support* as we embark on our journey to weight loss. On their own, herbs may not make us shed oodles of pounds; however, they can work with a sensible diet and exercise plan to help boost metabolism, provide energy for workouts, and reduce our cravings for less-than-healthy snacks. With a good weight loss regimen, herbs can make it *easier* to lose weight, and that’s half the battle.

It’s helpful to understand that weight loss plans are not “one size fits all” and neither are the herbs that can assist us. We each have our own challenges, body type, and constitution. We may also have other health issues that interfere with our ability to lose weight or that may cause contraindications and interactions with certain herbs. Don’t try to do and take everything listed in this article. Listen to your body to figure out what works for you. (If you have other serious health concerns, take pharmaceutical drugs, or simply would like a hand in the process, talk with your herbalist, doctor, pharmacist, and any other health practitioners that you would like to guide you.)

### Boost Metabolism

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Thermogenic herbs improve weight loss by boosting our basal metabolism – the rate at which we burn energy –chipping away at stored “energy” or fat.

- **Cayenne (*Capsicum annuum*)** and related hot peppers appear to enhance metabolism and curb appetite we consume 10 grams (about 1/3 ounce) with a meal or 28 grams (about 1 ounce) daily. Cayenne-rich appetizers and capsules both worked in studies, but it would be easier to get those quantities in food. (You’d need to swallow about 20 capsules to take in just 10 grams.) The amounts

used in studies are more than most of us would typically consume, so spice it up! Cayenne is generally safe, but it can aggravate heartburn, ulcers, and gastritis. Studies disagree as to whether high doses increase your risk of stomach cancer.

- **Green Tea (*Camellia sinensis*)** is revered throughout Asia as a delicious, healthy beverage. Monks initially took to tea because it helped them remain calm yet alert during meditation, and eventually the world caught on to tea's many benefits. Promising clinical, animal, and lab studies support its use for attaining and maintaining a healthy weight. In one study of obese patients, those who took green tea extract while dieting lost three times more pounds and more significantly reduced their BMI compared to those who just dieted. Although not all studies agree, green tea seems to increase metabolism, reduce appetite, and increase energy levels to improve weight loss success. Researchers think that the catechin epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) is responsible for tea's thermogenic activity. Similar forms of tea, such as the partially fermented oolong tea, also appear to improve weight loss. The modest caffeine content in green and oolong teas is surely behind some of these effects, but decaffeinated teas also show benefit. If you opt for green tea extract pills instead of the beverage, monitor your liver enzyme levels. Some case reports of liver toxicity with the extracts (often combined with other ingredients) have popped up, but the common tea form has a long history of safety.
- **Yerba Mate (*Ilex paraguariensis*)** is a popular beverage tea of South America that is now widely available in the US. The earthy, sometimes smoky tea is a rich source of antioxidants and modest amounts of caffeine. (Early claims that it was caffeine-free were false.) Locals tout it as a health tonic, and animal studies suggest that mate helps fight obesity by boosting metabolism, curbing appetite, lowering glucose levels, triglycerides, and LDL cholesterol, and inhibiting genes that aggravate obesity. Mate tea makes a nice coffee alternative and blends particularly well with chai spices.

## **Enhance Energy**

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It's important for us to maintain solid energy levels as we diet and exercise. If we're too pooped, we're less apt to head to the gym or hike a mountain after work. Low energy levels can also make us seek sugar and other calorie-laden foods to give us a quick mental boost.

- **Rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*)** originated in Siberia where it is highly regarded for mental and physical energy as well as longevity. Moderate doses would be consumed on an ongoing basis to keep energy levels up, and high doses could be taken short term for greater support. Over the last decade, rhodiola has become more available and popular in America as an energy tonic. Experts believe that it acts as an adaptogen, improving our overall resistance to stress, and that it helps our body produce more ATP (energy for the body). Clinical research generally supports its use for boosting physical performance during exercise and athletics. I've also had phenomenal luck in my practice with rhodiola for women to enhance mental energy and reduce brain fog, particularly in menopause. It is somewhat stimulating, but it does not contain caffeine and has a good safety record.
- **Peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*)**, inhaled as an essential oil, perks up our energy levels by increasing cognitive activity. In one study of athletes on the treadmill, participants reported better workload and performance levels when they inhaled peppermint versus jasmine and the scent of stinky socks. Other studies confirm anecdotal reports that peppermint makes us feel less sleepy and improves our ability to do administrative tasks like typing, analyzing data, and alphabetizing. Keep a bottle by your desk or in your gym bag for a quick whiff now and then. Or use a diffuser to scent your office or workout space for longer periods of time.
- **Green Tea & Yerba Mate** contain modest amounts of caffeine and ample antioxidants to give us a slight boost during the day or before a workout. See "Boost Metabolism" for more on these herbs.

## Curb Cravings

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If you're having a hard time passing up on unhealthy treats, herbs can help level your playing field. Remember, though, that not everyone eats because they're hungry. If you eat because you're bored or stressed, some appetite suppressants may not work as well.

- **Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*, syn *O. tenuiflorum*)**, or tulsi, is treasured in India and has recently become popular in America. Ayurvedic medicine uses holy basil for a wide variety of health concerns including the cold and flu, protection from radiation, and balance of the doshas (Ayurvedic constitutional types). Here in the US, we have honed in on its ability to modulate levels of the stress hormone cortisol to relieve stress, improve mental focus, and balance blood sugar. Thanks to the interplay of these activities, holy basil does a nice job curbing cravings for sugar. I was grateful for tulsi tea while working a stressful job that kept a constant supply of difficult-to-resist donuts in the backroom. Once I began my mornings with a travel mug of equal parts holy basil and green tea, I had no trouble passing by those tasty, fried sweets.
- **Hoodia (*Hoodia gordonii*)**, a cactus-like plant from Africa, boomed into the “miracle pill” industry a few years ago for its incredible ability to suppress the appetite. The native people of the Kalahari desert have consumed hoodia for thousands of years to decrease their desire for food and water and to enhance their energy levels. Limited research and plenty of personal stories support this use. Unfortunately, hoodia is a slow-growing plant from the other side of the world. Questions linger over whether the plant is being ethically harvested and if most of the hoodia on the market is even hoodia. If you buy hoodia, ask the company if it is ethically cultivated and harvested.
- **Fiber, Apples & Glucomannan** reduce hunger by bulking up in your digestive system to help you absorb food more slowly, stabilize blood sugar, and make you feel more full. Certain sources of soluble fiber appear to be most effective: apples, pears, psyllium, and glucomannan. Glucomannan, the soluble fiber extracted from konjac root (*Amorphophallus konjac*), made headlines in health magazines for its ability to reduce improve weight loss, and reduce food consumption, blood sugar, and cholesterol. Studies have found that 1 to 4 grams of glucomannan taken before meals significantly enhanced weight loss. Prefer food? Studies have found that eating an apple or pear before meals significantly improves weight loss and reduces the amount of calories consumed throughout the day.

## SNEAKY SABOTEURS:

### Insulin Resistance, Type 2 Diabetes & Blood Sugar Issues

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Sugar issues are at the core of most of America's weight problem. Several factors in our culture set the stage: genetics, obesity, sedentary lifestyle, high-carb diet, and high stress levels. Cells begin to resist insulin, which can leave the body with excess blood sugar to deal with. To adapt, the body begins to change its metabolism, burns energy poorly, and stores excess “fuel” around our abdomens. Insulin and blood sugar issues can also lead to carbohydrate addiction, high triglycerides, and high LDL cholesterol levels. If this pattern sounds familiar, you will likely do well on a weight loss plan that involves a low-glycemic diet, weight-bearing exercise, and herbs and supplements that help correct the way your body deals with sugar.

- **Chromium** mineral levels tend to be deficient in individuals with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. A high carbohydrate diet is not only low in chromium, but it also directly reduces chromium levels in the body. Studies have found that chromium supplementation can help correct the body's metabolism, blood sugar, and cholesterol levels. Brewer's yeast – but not nutritional yeast – is our richest food source of chromium.
- **Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum spp*)**, a familiar baking spice, appears to reduce blood sugar and improve the cell's sensitivity to insulin, which can help correct metabolism. Just a teaspoon to a tablespoon of powdered cinnamon seems to help. Cinnamon powder gets slimy once wet, so mix it into oatmeal or yogurt to make it more palatable. For a delicious, sweet cinnamon tea, simmer one to three sticks of

cinnamon or a teaspoon to a tablespoon of cinnamon “chips” in eight ounces of water for 20 minutes. This has the added benefit of offering something sweet for your palate while actually lowering your blood sugar. Cinnamon is best consumed with food; taking it on an empty stomach can cause hypoglycemia.

- **Holy Basil**, as mentioned above in “Curb Cravings,” also helps improve our sugar balance.

## Low Thyroid

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Both subclinical and acute hypothyroid conditions are on the rise, particularly in women. Many factors may be at play – not all of which are understood – however, many holistic practitioners feel that stress and poor diet (including iodine deficiency) are to blame. Poor thyroid function can cause weight gain, exhaustion, depression, poor mental focus, increased pain, weak hair, skin, and nails, and goiter (enlarged thyroid). Simple lab tests at a doctor or naturopath’s office are usually necessary to diagnose a thyroid problem. Be aware that the recommended ranges for thyroid hormones have changed and suggest that more people than previously thought have subacute thyroid problems. Unfortunately, not all labs and practitioners are on board with the new standards.

- **Ashwagandha** (*Withania somnifera*) shows promise as one of the few herbs that enhance thyroid function. Animal studies suggest that ashwagandha increases levels of the thyroid hormone T4 and possibly T3. The root is traditionally used to enhance energy and vitality, support the nervous system, and reduce pain.
- **Iodine** is necessary for adequate thyroid function. If you have low thyroid function and your iodine levels are deficient, you may want to increase your dietary levels of this mineral through a multivitamin (not all contain iodine), iodized salt, and seaweeds including bladderwrack (*Fucus vesiculosus*). Make sure that your seaweed comes from clean waters and is not contaminated with heavy metals; some companies test their seaweeds for safety.
- **Avoiding Goitrogens**, or foods that may inhibit thyroid function by reducing iodine levels, is helpful for many with thyroid problems. Soy, in its many forms, is common aggravator. Broccoli family plants can also slow down the thyroid, particularly if they’re not cooked. Caffeine may also reduce thyroid function. Some foods, such as coconut, avocado, and saturated fat, seem to enhance thyroid function.

## Chronic Stress

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Chronic stress is surprisingly connected with poor blood sugar metabolism, thyroid function, and many other factors that impede our ability to maintain a healthy diet and lose weight. When we’re under stress, our body throws sugar into our bloodstream to give us energy. Long-term stress can lead to high blood sugar levels even if our diets aren’t particularly high in carbohydrates. This, in turn, leads to poor metabolism. Our stress hormones can also interfere with other hormones, including thyroid and reproductive hormones. Our sleep can become less restful, which further aggravates the body’s state of balance.

- **Adaptogenic herbs** appear to modulate stress hormones and improve our resistance to stress. As a result, they improve our energy levels and have a host of other benefits including improved immunity. In our day and age, it’s no wonder most herbalists think of adaptogens as our superheroes. Many of the herbs already discussed are believed to have adaptogen properties: holy basil, rhodiola, and ashwagandha. Others include eleuthero (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*), ginseng (*Panax spp*), codonopsis (*Codonopsis spp*), and gotu kola (*Centella asiatica*). Some are more relaxing (holy basil, gotu kola, ashwagandha), while others are more stimulating (rhodiola, ginseng, eleuthero, codonopsis). They all have their specialties, and I like to use them in combination or singularly depending on a person’s needs and constitution.
- **Serotonin** is a neurotransmitter that is associated with mood health. Low serotonin levels seem to cause and aggravate depression, anxiety, and insomnia. We may be able to enhance our serotonin balance with supplements like L-tryptophan, 5-HTP, and St. John’s wort (*Hypericum perforatum*).

Fish oil may also help improve mood. Use caution with St. John's wort if you take pharmaceutical drugs. Consult a practitioner before taking any of these if you're on anti-depressant drugs.

- **Lavender (*Lavandula spp*)** essential oil, inhaled is well-known for its relaxing properties. Clinical research supports its reputation to calm the nervous system, improve mood, and enhance sleepiness. Other essential oils, such as citrus, seem to have more uplifting effects. See "Peppermint," above, for ways to use lavender essential oil.

## WEIGHT LOSS HERBS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

These herbs fall into the category of "herbs that may work but are not safe." In my opinion, the health risks they present are not worth the few pounds they might help you shed.

- **Ephedra (*Ephedra sinica*)** is a "whole package" weight loss herb with a whole package of health concerns. Although ephedra (and its constituents ephedrine and pseudoephedrine) appears to help boost metabolism, increase fat breakdown, and curb appetite, its use has been linked to stroke and other potentially deadly cardiovascular events. The fact that ephedra is often combined with caffeine and other "stressful" ingredients doesn't help. The FDA banned ephedra in 2004 after several deaths were linked to its use. In traditional Chinese medicine, ephedra may have great uses, but it is a dangerous choice for weight loss.
- **Synephrine**, a compound extracted from bitter orange peel (*Citrus aurantium*), is often combined with caffeine in diet products as a replacement for ephedra. According to reports by the Mayo Clinic and other researchers, this combination may increase the risk of stroke and other serious health concerns.
- **Yohimbe (*Pausinystalia yohimbe*)** and its extract yohimbine are best known for their "herbal Viagra" effects; however, they've also become common ingredients in weight loss products. Yohimbe is a stimulant with a long list of subchronic and acute side effects including cardiovascular stress, blurry vision, panic attacks, seizures, kidney failure, and death.
- **Caffeine-stacking** is practiced by many diet pill and beverage manufacturers. Often three or more sources of caffeine are combined including isolated caffeine, kola nut (*Cola spp*), guarana (*Paullinia cupana*), green, oolong, black, and/or white tea (*Camellia sinensis*), yerba mate tea (*Ilex paraguariensis*), chocolate or cacao (*Theobroma cacao*) and/or coffee (*Coffea spp*). Ingredient labels are often written in a way that makes the caffeine less easy to identify, for example, "Yunnan tea leaf" and "mate bush leaf extract." It may say "contains no herbal caffeine" even though it contains non-herbal caffeine, or vice versa. Modest amounts of caffeine are safe for most people, but high doses may aggravate the cardiovascular and nervous systems.

## HELPFUL TEA RECIPES:

### Calm Alert Tea

Great for morning energy, high in antioxidants, and some caffeine. It also may help stabilize blood sugar. Infuse 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per cup for 5 minutes.

- 1 part gotu kola
- 1 part holy basil
- 1 parts jasmine green tea

### Energy "Coffee"

Drink solo or combine with coffee and brew in the coffee maker. Decoct or brew 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per cup for 15 minutes.

- 1 part eleuthero
- 1 part codonopsis
- 1 part ashwagandha
- 1/8 part nutmeg

- 1/4 part cinnamon chips  
(or 1 stick per cup)

### **“Earl Grey” Tea**

*Simple & delicious! Brew as you would regular tea.*

- 1 sprig fresh lemon verbena or lemon balm
- 1 bag or 1 teaspoon of green/black tea

### **Nourishing Oat Chai**

This recipe is a little complicated, but well worth it. You can keep it in the fridge for a day or two.

*Decoct in 16 ounces of water for 15 minutes or let sit in thermos for 1 hour:*

- 1 inch fresh ginger, grated or sliced
- 2-3 cinnamon sticks or 1 tablespoon chips

In this hot tea, steep 2 tablespoons of the following and let steep for another 15 minutes or more:

- 2 parts oatmeal &/or oat straw
- 2 parts rooibos (caffeine free), mate or black tea (some caffeine)
- 1 part garam masala blend
- 1/2 part clove buds or powder
- A few crushed cardamom seeds

Add the following to taste (optional):

- Honey or maple syrup
- Milk as a creamer

### **Blueberry Vanilla Tea**

Great beverage to have after meals, which also helps lower blood sugar levels. Infuse 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon per cup for 15 minutes.

- 1 part blueberry leaves
- 1 part dried blueberries
- 1/2 inch vanilla bean per cup for

### **Simple Cinnamon Tea**

Delicious tea – a favorite amongst my students. Well-brewed, it is extremely sweet without any sugar.

Decoct (simmer) to 1 tablespoon per cup for 15-20 minutes.

- Cinnamon “chips” or 2 sticks per cup

### **Green Tea with a Kick**

This easy blend was inspired by a lab study that found 1 part cayenne added to 25 parts green tea increased the cancer-killing capability of green tea alone 100 times. It’s hard to know what the exact benefit would be “in vivo,” but it can’t hurt! Both plants are potent antioxidants and cardiovascular tonics.

Infuse for 3 to 5 minutes.

- 1 teabag or teaspoon green tea
- 1 dash cayenne powder

### **Store Bought:**

Holy Basil: Tulsi (Holy Basil) Green Tea or other Tulsi brand teas

Cinnamon: Good Earth teas, Celestial Seasonings Bengal Spice

Green Tea: Any of the many great brands. I love Numi Monkey King (Jasmine green).

Mate: Guayaki (smoked) or Mate Factor (unsmoked)

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