



Herbalism is a traditional medicinal or folk medicine practice based on the use of plants and plant extracts. Herbalism is also known as botanical medicine, medical herbalism, herbal medicine, herbology, and phytotherapy. The scope of herbal medicine is sometimes extended to include fungal and bee products, as well as minerals, shells and certain animal parts.

Without **medicinal plants**, most medicines you take would not exist. Over 40% of medicines now prescribed in the U.S. contain chemicals derived from plants.

A comprehensive search of known plants for *medicinal* chemicals is an enormous task. Of the estimated 250,000 plant species on earth, only 2% have been thoroughly screened for chemicals with potential medicinal use. Because native plant habitats are destroyed almost daily, many medicinally valuable plants will be gone before scientists can even investigate them.

Many plants synthesize substances that are useful to the maintenance of health in humans and other animals. These include aromatic substances, most of which are phenols or their oxygen-substituted derivatives such as tannins. Many are secondary metabolites, of which at least 12,000 have been isolated - a number estimated to be less than 10% of the total. In many cases, these substances (particularly the alkaloids) serve as plant defense mechanisms against predation by microorganisms, insects, and herbivores. Many of the herbs and spices used by humans to season food yield useful medicinal compounds.

The use of medicinal plants to treat disease is almost universal among non-industrialized societies. A number of traditions came to dominate the practice of herbal medicine at the end of the twentieth century.

Many of the pharmaceuticals currently available to physicians have a long history of use as herbal remedies, including opium, aspirin, digitalis, and quinine.

Use of *medicinal plants* can be as informal as, for example, culinary use or consumption of an

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herbal tea or supplement, although the sale of some herbs considered dangerous is often restricted to the public. Sometimes such herbs are provided to professional herbalists by specialist companies. Many herbalists, both professional and amateur, often grow or "wildcraft" their own herbs.