

hack, sputter, wheeze... herbs to help you cough

...presented by herbalist iim mcdonald

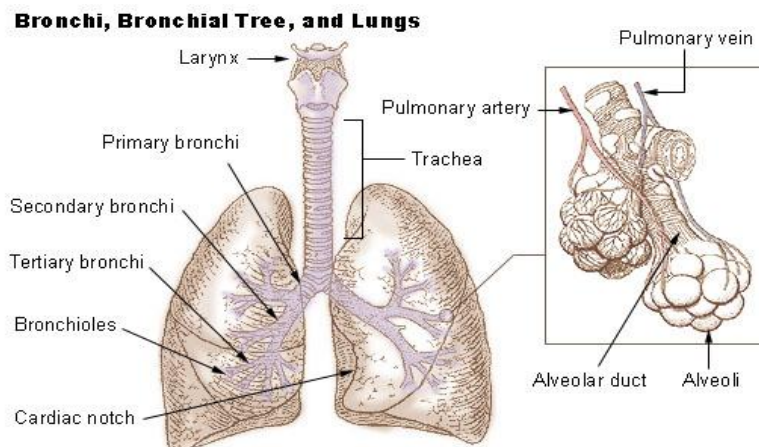
Coughs, congestion and other common respiratory woes are among the most readily encountered conditions herbalists are presented with, and yet often far too little differentiation is practiced when suggestions are made. To say, "This herb is good for coughs" is too vague; it doesn't acknowledge the important fact that coughs are qualitatively unique. We don't want to simply offer suggestions for a cough, we want to offer suggestions for *the* cough, as expressed by the individual asking for our help. It is this consideration that ensures our approach remains truly holistic.

structures and functions

To really understand the way respiratory issues are best treated, it helps to understand the structures and functions of the various parts of what we call the respiratory system. These are divided into an upper and lower half, with the thorax seen as the dividing point. The thorax is the chest between your neck and abdomen, which seems to me to be a rather wide dividing line, so for practical purposes, it's easier to use the neck as a more concrete divider: The neck and head is upper, the chest is lower.

the lower respiratory tract

The lower respiratory tract also includes the trachea (or "windpipe"), which branches out into the bronchial tree (which yes, looks astoundingly tree-like... how cool). Like a tree, the main "trunks" of the bronchi keep dividing into smaller and smaller "branches", resulting in a massive amount of surface area to breathe with. At a certain point, the bronchi become bronchioles, which are similar but lack the same mucus membranes of the larger bronchial structures. We might think about how at a certain point, tree branches bear twigs not protected by bark. The bronchioles leaf out into alveoli; these, just like leaves on a tree, are responsible for the miraculous feat of extracting oxygen from air, which is absorbed by the blood vessels that feed these tissues. Oxygenated blood is then brought back to the heart and pumped throughout the body. This entire respiratory tree, from bronchial trunk to alveoli, exists, of course, within the lungs, which are themselves enclosed by the serous membrane. The serous membrane is surrounded by the inner visceral pleura and the outer parietal pleura, and enclosed within and protected by the rib cage. Serous fluid lubricates these tissues so that as our lungs expand and contract, we experience no painful friction.



unifying tissues

mucus membranes

Throughout, the majority of the respiratory tract is lined with mucus membranes. While we commonly think of the our lungs and nasal cavity as being internal (after all, they are inside of us), these tissues are actually external surfaces, in the same way that hole that goes through a donut is not the “inside” of the donut. And in many ways, the mucus membranes are most similar to skin, excepting its ability to secrete mucus.

Mucus itself is an amazingly virtuous substance. Too often now, people wrongly consider mucus a sign of illness. But herbalist Paul Bergner has shared with me that in fact, mucus is one of the body's most precious immune fluids, acting as a lubricant to protect tissues from damage and provide moisture, and as an immune defense, providing a barrier with which to protect tissues and trap pathogens.

Imagine the body as a castle, complete with ramparts and turrets and all. Now imagine an army of invaders, who want to use our castle for their own nefarious ends. To do so, they need to storm the castle and attempt to breach the points of entry. As they're scaling our body's castle walls, the body responds in a number of ways to defend itself. One of the defenses it possesses is mucus. Think about it like a pot of tar, which can be poured over the invading pathogens, hindering them from getting into our castle and at the same time adding a layer of protection between them and our tissues. In addition to this purely mechanical action, mucus is laden with immunoglobulin A antibodies (IgA), an extremely powerful and dynamic antibody that can identify and destroy the invading pathogens in a number of ways. So, while we often think of our running nose as an irritating symptom, its actually one of the body's most potent immune responses.

Yes, mucus is really good stuff; in fact, the only other fluid produced by the body that is so immunologically laden is a mother's breastmilk.

breathing

. : inspiration and expiration : .

Inspiration is inhalation; expiration is exhalation. We're all doing this all the time, and yet often we pay little to no attention to it. This is really a sore loss, as the quality of our breathing is a key factor to the depth of our wellness; there are indeed very few aspects of the body unrelated to breath (if there are any...).

It seems strange to express how deeply I'd like you all to breathe, since you couldn't stop to spite me. But what I mean, more clearly, is to breathe with awareness. Breath is the only life sustaining function that we have such a high degree of control over; this clearly should make us aware of its importance. Feel the quality of your breath... its nature. Is it full? Deep? Relaxed? Easy? If not, how? In what way? Tight? Shallow? Irregular? Are your exhalations sighs? These observations point to underlying patterns, and can often help identify important factors in respiratory conditions more central to effective treatment than can the name of this or that diagnosis.

The Buddhist monk [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) shares a simple breathing exercise: "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out... We don't try to control our

breathing. Whether our in-breath is long or short, deep or shallow, we just breathe naturally and shine the light of mindfulness on it. When we do this we notice that, in fact, our breathing does become slower and deeper naturally... We don't have to make an extra effort. It just becomes deeper and slower by itself, and we recognize that.”

There are certainly more elaborate breathing exercises that can be very useful for specific purposes, or for people who do better with a more concrete structure when trying to build habits, but this, I feel, is a good foundational starting place.

using herbs; understanding actions

When using herbs to treat the respiratory responses that accompany colds and flus, it is important to differentiate between the qualitative natures of both the herbs being considered, and the cough/congestion itself. In doing so, we can not only more effectively ease the discomfort of the respiratory ailment, but do so in a way that resolves the conditions that are causing it in a manner that is deeper and broader acting than just focusing on an infection (which may or may not be present).

To best understand this differentiation, we must understand the underlying actions by which herbs help to resolve coughing and congestion, and also learn to recognize the differing natures of these symptoms. A common term often used, specific to coughing, is “expectorant”. This implies that the herb helps one to expectorate, or expel, mucous. This category, however, is too broad to be very useful, as expectoration can occur by a number of more foundational actions, and plants helpful in some situation might aggravate another. Herbs for upper respiratory conditions are likewise often simply referred to as decongestants, but again, this designation tells us little about the many ways in which an herb can manifest this action. The more specific properties of herbs can be categorized in numerous ways, but I find these actions to be the most useful in understanding their nature, relevant to the respiratory system:

aromatics

Aromatic herbs are readily recognized by their aroma, which is associated with their volatile oil content. When crushed, infused or otherwise extracted, aromatic herbs release their scent, and with it, their medicinal virtues. The properties associated with aromatic plants possess a number of common traits, though these may vary in degree and nature in particular plants. Specific to the respiratory system aromatics tend to be antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, stimulating to processes (like mucous secretions or circulation), relaxing to tissues, and “dispersive” in nature. By this I mean that they help to dispel congestion or stagnation, expressed either physiologically as mucous in the lungs or sinuses or experientially as that clouded, dull, heavy sensation in one’s mind when they’re all stuffed up. Aromatic herbs should always be considered when one’s respiratory woes are stuffy and congested in nature. A good example of an aromatic would be the common spice thyme.

demulcents

Demulcents are plants that known to moisten dry, irritated and/or enflamed tissues. This response is often the result of the presence of mucilage, a carbohydrate that becomes goeey, slippery & viscid, and somehow soothes and lubricates irritated tissues. I say “somehow” because mucilage is not absorbed into the bloodstream to be delivered via circulation to the lungs... there’s no clear mechanism that explains its effect on lung tissue at all, but mucilaginous, demulcent herbs are tired and true remedies for respiratory

dryness, and what they lack in rational clarity they make up for in their immense virtue. However they do it, demulcents help to moisten dry lung tissues and in so doing loosen and release dried out phlegm. They can also help with easing a sensation of tightness in the lungs not caused by tension, but arising from dry mucous membranes that lack the pliancy that comes with adequate moisture. Different herbs are demulcent to different degrees. Marshmallow is overtly mucilaginous, violet is notably so, and plantain is more mildly demulcent. Sweet tasting herbs like licorice (and indeed honey as well) are also considered moistening and therefore demulcent. Demulcents are used when tissues feel hot, dry, and tight.

relaxants

Relaxants are more commonly referred to as antispasmodics, though this term implies a more limited scope of action than most of these plants possess. Relaxants lessen not only spasm, but tension and, more subtly, resistance to the flow of circulation and the vital energy. It should be remembered that sometimes dryness can be confused with tension; dry tissues are “tight” or “stiff”, as opposed to contracted, but the sensations can be confused. Dryness requires mucilaginous demulcents. Relaxants are often aromatic, but the stronger ones may possess a skunky or acrid aroma or flavor. New England aster is a wonderful and underutilized respiratory relaxant, lobelia a well known and decidedly potent one.

coughs

Coughing itself is not a “sickness”, but clearly an attempt by the body to expel mucous/phlegm (a process called “expectoration”) and clear infection. It is an immune response, and as such should not be suppressed. Rather, there are a number of herbs that are useful in helping a person cough *effectively*; they facilitate the immune response and resolution occurs because this process is completed, rather than aborted. Because they work by supporting expectoration, these herbs may initially instigate more coughing, but as it will be productive in nature, it will lead to a quicker recovery.

A cough expresses much in its qualitative characteristics to reveal the underlying conditions in the lungs; more than any other symptom, the qualities of dryness, dampness, and spasm (though these states are not mutually exclusive) can often be clearly felt and even heard.

dry...

Dry coughs are, well... dry. The mucous feels “dried out” on the tissues within the lungs (imagine rubber cement dried out in a bottle), and coughing goes on and on and on but is never fruitful. These coughs may sound hollow or wheezy, and the tissues of the lungs may feel tight. Herbalists, in such cases, often rely on demulcents, herbs moisten lung tissues as described above.

marshmallow *althea officinalis* (pic)

Marshmallow, being so decidedly mucilaginous, is one of the first plants to think of if dryness is the predominant and permeating symptom in your pulmonary woe. Herbalist Michael Moore (no, not the movie guy) writes, “Physiologically active mucopolysaccharides are found in Mallow, those specialized, gel forming starches found in many plants and in the mucous and interstitial gel of our bodies, which limit inflammation, help mobilize scavenging white blood cells, and are particularly helpful in chronic bronchial mucosal

inflammation...”. Marshmallow is one of those plants you can add to pretty much any formula to increase its net moistening effect. The roots are strongest in this regard, but the leaves and flowers are also used. Common lawn mallow is a milder herb in regards to the quantity of mucilage it contains, but it can be used as a substitute.

Considerations and Contraindications: Practically speaking, none. Because marshmallow root tea can be viscid enough to temporarily coat the intestinal tissues, its been advised to avoid using it immediately prior to taking any medication, which makes sense, though I’ve never heard of any cases in which this actually caused a problem.

licorice *glycyrrhiza glabra* (pic)

Licorice is another moistening plant, though it offers this action less through its possessing mucilage than to its nature as a fluid generating “sweet tonic”. Licorice is known to harmonize and potentize the actions of other herbs in which it is mixed; often, it is added in lesser quantities to formulas, as opposed to being the main plant used. That said, a simple cough syrup can be made by combining a decoction of licorice and honey. It is worth clarifying that black licorice candy tastes like a combination of anise and molasses; licorice’s flavor is primarily sweet.

Considerations and Contraindications: Licorice is often said to possess properties that aggravate hypertension and electrolyte balance, but these results seem to be idiosyncratic in their expression. Most people don’t experience problems, and most of the studies revealing issues used concentrated extracts and not simple herbal preparations. I know of [one case](#) where daily use of a decoction (amount of herb used to make it unspecified) for a few months caused hypertension, which resolved quickly when use was discontinued. [Some studies](#) have also showed licorice to lower circulating testosterone. Though these seem like daunting “side effects”, I would say that, personally, they don’t restrict my use of the root when indicated, and I can’t say that they could be called common. In no cases I’m aware of are these problems associated with use of the herb in limited durations for acute problems.

violet *viola spp.* (pic)

Violets are sorely underutilized, which is odd, because they’re both abundant and very effective. Different violet species can vary in regards to how mucilaginous they are, but a simple taste of a leaf will display its demulgency (you’ll feel the slipperiness in your mouth). Violets are sweet, moistening and very nutritive. They also possess the ability to help relieve congested lymphatic glands; something to look for when considering its use.

Considerations and Contraindications: None to speak of.

mullein *verbascum thapsus* (pic)

Mullein leaves are specific for dry coughs that shake the whole frame of the body, and/or leave the ribs aching. There’s also a “wheezing” sort of noise I listen for, and if I hear it, I know Mullein will help. The tincture will produce almost an instant relief, but often needs to be taken frequently. Mullein can be taken as a tea, a tincture, and even smoked... Smoking anything when your lungs are bothering you may seem counterintuitive, but Mullein works. I have a friend who jumps at the chance to give someone a pipe full of dried Mullein to puff on. When they start coughing like crazy, he smiles and says, “yeah, but its *good* coughing,

isn't it?" My friend Joyce Wardwell says Mullein smoke is amazingly effective in whooping cough, if not the easiest mode of preparation to deliver...

Because the little hairs that make Mullein leaves so fuzzy can be irritating if present in a tea or tincture, it's one of the few herbs I suggest using a coffee filter with... there's no point in easing a cough if you're gonna leave the person's throat scratchy.

Considerations and Contraindications: None known, other than that some people being irritated by the fine hairs.

plantain *plantago major, p. lanceolata* (pic & pic)

Plantain is, like Mullein, very effective for treating dry coughs, and the two combine together wonderfully. I think Plantain is especially effective at loosening dried out mucous from the lungs; it seems to also help restore a flow of healthy mucous. It is very useful if the coughing has been instigated by breathing in any irritating foreign particles. Plantain also excels when a cough seems to be originating from an irritation at the back of the throat or right at the base of the windpipe. Maybe it's from sinus drainage, or maybe there's just a feeling of irritation that's like an "itch", and coughing seems like the only way to "scratch" it.

Considerations and Contraindications: None known.



damp...

Damp coughs, obviously, are "wet" in nature. Expectoration is difficult because the mucous/phlegm doesn't have enough "substance" to be coughed out; it's too loose, too fluidic. Often damp coughs will be worse when the person lies down. To treat this, warming, drying herbs are often used to "dry" the phlegm enough to give it some body to be coughed out. Warming aromatics help to break up damp congestion.

garlic *allium sativum* (pic)

Garlic is really a systemic medicine, but as we can tell from the readily recognized "garlic breath", its oils are excreted through the lung tissue. This has the effect of saturating the lungs with garlic's broadly antimicrobial oils, and *this* has the effect of making garlic very useful for respiratory infections. David Winston once told me that he hadn't treated a case of antibiotic resistant pneumonia that hadn't cleared up using garlic. Of course, things need not be so dire; just think of it as being one of our best pulmonary antimicrobials. You can also use it proactively; if everyone around you is coughing and sneezing, having garlic saturated lung tissue will make any microbial critter you do inhale find your mucosa less than hospitable. Not to mention people won't get all that close to you.

Considerations and Contraindications: Taken to excess, it will eventually cause vomiting, stomach irritation, digestive distress, insomnia, and some other dilemmas well covered in Paul Bergner's "[The Healing Power of Garlic](#)". These aren't really a concern for most reasonable usage. Some people, especially those of a hot and dry constitution, are aggravated by Garlic, finding it excessively drying and instilling a sense of restlessness. It might be avoided if nursing, as the taste may cause infants to reject breast milk (whoa, mom, you STINK!)... but this is not always the case. Garlic is contraindicated for vampires.

osha ligisticum porteri (pic)

Osha is just an amazing plant. It's exceptionally oily, and akin to garlic in regards to having those antimicrobial oils excreted via the lungs, clearing infection in the process. I apply many of the same indications for osha that I do for garlic, though it seems less drying in nature to me; I've always thought this was because of the oils adding moisture to the lungs as they're eliminated by them. And like Garlic, it makes a good preventive. You also sweat it out; it's deeply penetrating in its action. Teas of osha don't offer its full virtue, so you can use a tincture or simply give a piece of the root a chew, stick it in your cheek, and let your saliva do the extraction. I think this may be the most effective way to use it.

Considerations and Contraindications: Not for use during pregnancy. Though safe for long term use, I recommend only using it when you need it, so as not to stress the wild populations by creating excess demand. Osha has not been successfully cultivated on any significant scale, so only by supporting individual herbalists collecting and tending stands in their mountain habitat can the wild populations be preserved. No other cautions are associated with the use of Osha, but care should be taken in its identification, as it resembles Poison Hemlock, a deadly herb. The properties of the herb are likely to pass through breast milk, and while I don't know of any inherent problems with this, some (though not all) nursing children may object to the flavor.

angelica angelica archangelica, a. atropurpurea (pic)

Angelica is a cousin of Osha, and one of my mainstays for damp/wet coughs. It is diaphoretic, and paradoxically rich in oils, making it also useful for oil-deficient dryness in the lungs (plants are so damn hard to classify...). My wife has described angelica as "grabbing onto the mucous and lifting it up and out of the lungs". Angelica has a relaxing, soothing action which acts on both the tissues and the emotional body. At the same time, it is invigorating, improving peripheral circulation.

Considerations and Contraindications: Angelica is considered an emmenagogue (an herb that promotes menstruation) and therefore contraindicated during pregnancy. While I personally don't think its use should be completely dismissed, it should probably be used under the guidance of an herbalist in this circumstance. Do not confuse with water hemlock, or other poisonous members of its family, including, possibly, [*Angelica venenosa*](#).

elecampane inula helenium (pic)

Elecampane is aromatic, cooling and drying. Though not everyone says so, and even though it does contain some mucilage, I've always found it exceptionally drying in nature. It's good for damp coughs, and as I learned from Matthew Wood specific for deep seated, hard to get to, intractably "stuck" green mucous. The plant is exceptionally antimicrobial; and has tested effective against MRSA (methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus).

Considerations and Contraindications: I find elecampane's very drying nature can dry up a wet cough and make it a dry cough; discontinue if dryness ensues. I wonder (but don't know) if excessive or ongoing use could aggravate lactation in constitutionally dry people.

thyme thymus spp. (pic)

Thyme is an exceptionally effective, easy to get ahold of (and undervalued) warming, drying aromatic. Its oils are also highly antimicrobial, and though certainly a potent remedy,

is not so intense as osha, garlic or elecampane. It lends itself quite well to tea, and the tincture is also an excellent remedy. I like to combine the two (though sometime herbalists debate dogmatically about whether a tea or tincture of this or that plant is “best”, I’ve never viewed the options as being “either or”). Thyme makes an outstanding steam inhalation.

Considerations and Contraindications: Generally none, but stronger preparations or ongoing use of this herb can inhibit lactation and so should be avoided during breastfeeding.

sage *salvia spp.* (pic)

Sage is another... still warming, and still drying, but again, like thyme, not drastically so. Some have classified it as cooling; but that’s not been my impression; it probably varies with the differing species used. It’s a quite effective remedy, easy to get ahold of, and familiar to those who might be more skittish about using plants with weird names. Like thyme, excellent as an inhalation.

Considerations and Contraindications: Generally none, but stronger preparations or ongoing use of this herb can inhibit lactation and so should be avoided during breastfeeding.

dry above, damp below...

Sometimes, a cough will seem dry when the person is coughing shallowly and mainly with the upper lungs, but if they really get going and cough deeply, you’ll hear a damp, wet mucous that has settled down to the bottom of the lungs. For this, I tend to use:

butterfly weed/pleurisy root *asclepius tuberosa* (pic)

If people have the dry above/damp below cough, and have (or have had) a feverish respiratory illness associated with that, butterfly weed is often indicated. It is a diaphoretic, and a very nice expectorant as indicated above. Michael Moore tells us that butterfly weed shifts the body’s eliminatory processes from the kidneys to the lungs & skin. As the more common name “pleurisy root” suggests, it has been found useful in treating inflammation and irritation of the lungs, with dryness causing a “stitch” of pain on inhalations or when coughing.

Considerations and Contraindications: The most members of the Milkweed family contain cardiac glycosides that can potentially interact with heart medications. Probably, this potential is most concentrated in immortal, much less so in Common Milkweeds, and much much less so in Butterfly Weed. Still worth being conscious of, though its not something I feel a lot of concern over.

spasmodic...

Spasmodic coughs can range from violent paroxysms to fixed tension, and different herbs act best at different gradations along that scale. Here, we use relaxants; herbs that ease tension causing a resistance to the flow of energy in the body.

wild cherry bark *prunus spp.* (pic)

Wild cherry bark is an archetypal cough medicine; so much so that even lousy drug store cough drops have kept the association of “wild cherry”, though there’s no longer any actual

plant material left in them. Wild Cherry relaxes the cough reflex, is cooling and mildly moistening, and tastes good to boot. There seems to be endless debate about how best to prepare it, as it contains hydrocyanic acid and that freaks people out. But, there's far too little of that in the fresh or dried bark to be an issue (though avoid material in the process of drying). It is in fact the presence of this compound that gives cherry its relaxant action. On the whole, though, cool water infusions of the plant seem to best convey its virtues, or a fresh tincture. Physio-Medicalist William Cook tells us to make syrups from cool water infusions.

Considerations and Contraindications: Because cherry bark contains hydrocyanic acid, it is often listed as potentially toxic, but the normal quantities used medicinally are insufficient to cause problems.

new england aster *aster novae-angliae* (pic)

New england aster is an exceptional respiratory relaxant, it releases tension in the lungs and eases breathing. It is especially good when the tissues of the lungs seem sensitive and "reactive"... as if there's a quivering that, if it gets quivery enough, will prompt coughing. I've seen its use in asthma offer a help that lasted into the next day. An acquaintance with emphysema has been experimenting with it and found that it has served him as well as his inhaler when he's found himself need one. I've seen new england aster help resolve lingering, irritable coughs that just won't go away a number of times now. Its diaphoretic properties increase its general usefulness. I frequently combine it with all sorts of other herbs, and am constantly amazed at its versatility & efficacy. It is little known but anyone who uses it is sure to find it among their most trusted herbs.

Considerations and Contraindications: Not surprisingly, there are no cautions to be found on a plant hardly anyone uses. Still, even in the liberally inclusive book on poisonous plants I have, there's no mention of any toxicity associated with any Aster species.

mullein *verbascum thapsus* (pic)

Mullein, mentioned above, seems specific for short, hard, forceful coughs, leaving the chest feeling sore and painful.

Considerations and Contraindications: Again, none to speak of, other than the hairs.

lobelia *lobelia inflata* (pic)

Lobelia is an herb whose toxicity is greatly overstated. It has been said to have "caused deaths", but looking into its history you'll see that such claims are entirely unsubstantiated (see below). That is not to say, though, that it isn't strong medicine, to be used with a light hand when indicated; it is strong. The tincture is preferable to the tea, and less likely to cause the nausea/vomiting its (in)famous for. A tincture of good quality dried or fresh Lobelia works like nothing else for intense, uncontrollable spasm and coughing fits; coughing so much that you gag or feel like you're going to throw up... the phrase "cough up a lung" comes to mind. There may be an off taste in the back of the throat, perhaps kind of peppery. Take from 1-5 drops. That's it. More *isn't* better; better to use the small dose more frequently. It'll help.

Considerations and Contraindications: There is so much conflicting information of the “toxicity” of lobelia; it certainly can cause nausea and vomiting, though as mentioned above the tincture is less likely to do so. Paul Bergner has a very good comprehensive write up on this issue [here](#). Though widely stated to be avoided during pregnancy, under the supervision of an experienced herbalist its use might be acceptable.



hot & cold...

It also helps to consider whether a cough or respiratory condition is “hot” or “cold”... but whereas dry, damp or spasmodic is often obvious even when simply hearing the cough, these qualities seem less easily determined; ask someone if they have a hot or cold cough, and you’ll probably be returned an expression of bewilderment.

The body, however, still gives up its signs. Chief among these is the state of the respiratory mucous... clear, flowing mucous is healthy, but that white/opaque mucous indicated cold (requiring “warming” herbs) while yellow/green/brown indicated hot (requiring “cooling” herbs). Here are the energetics of some of the herbs we’ve already discussed (plus a few extras thrown in for good measure). Please take note that there are always disagreements about whether certain herbs are hot or cold... some herbs just affect different people differently, and this is especially the case when considering herbs whose warming or cooling inclinations aren’t overtly obvious. I’ve tried to note examples where there is disagreement:

dry coughs...

- marshmallow - cooling and moistening
- common mallow - cooling and moistening
- mullein - cooling/neutral and moistening
- plantain - cooling and moistening
- violet - cooling and moistening
- licorice - neutral to warm & moistening (some consider it slightly warm, others slightly cool)
- coltsfoot - cooling and moistening

damp coughs...

- angelica - warming & drying*
- osha - warming & drying*
- sage - warming & drying*
- garlic - warming & drying
- elecampane - cooling & drying (some consider it warming; I think it's predominantly drying)
- thyme - warming & drying
- yerba santa - warming & drying

**some aromatic herbs that are warming and drying can still sometimes be good for dry coughs because their oils are partially excreted through lung tissues, however, this effect is transient, and if used over time their net effect will be drying, so consider them, but balance their action with demulcents and reserve them for short term use.*

spasmodic coughs...

- wild cherry bark – cool & moistening
- new england aster - warming & drying

wild lettuce - cooling & drying
mullein - cooling/neutral & moistening
lobelia - neutral & drying
skunk cabbage - hot & drying (I've seen some say cold – but totally don't get that)
cramp bark - warming & drying (Bergner says its cooling)
black cohosh - cooling; I haven't decided moistening & drying - seems to do both
ground ivy - cooling & drying

Specific to croup ("barking" cough): bloodroot, perhaps with lobelia, in drop doses.

inhalations; steams and smokes

The inhalation of aromatic plants can be immensely virtuous in their effect upon respiratory woes. Simply inhaling the scent of these plants allows the antimicrobial oils to have a direct contact effect on the mucous membranes of the sinuses and lungs, but you can facilitate this even better by using the plants as steams or smokes.

To make a steam inhalation, simply take a handful of sage leaves (or thyme or eucalyptus or wild bergamot or any other strongly aromatic herb), put it in a pot & bring it to a boil, covered. Remove from the stove, place on a heat safe surface where you can sit comfortably (a wooden cutting board on a table is usually nice). Get a towel, drape it over your head, and lean over the pot. Carefully remove the lid (don't let the outrush of steam scald you) and inhale, deeply. The longer you can sit with the steam and plant vapor, and the more fully and deeply you can breathe, the better.

I couldn't possibly overstate the immense value of steams in treating congested states.

You can also utilize smoke. While it can seem counter intuitive to the modern mind that deems the inhalation of any smoke inherently bad to some degree, this act can in fact be intensely healing. Paul Bergner tells of a client who came into his office in an intense state of coughing and sneezing; he gave her a white sage smudge stick and had her take a "smoke shower" by staying in the bathroom as long as she could with the aromatic smoke. When she came out she was not only not coughing and sneezing, but "settled".

If you smell the aromatic oils in plants, they're actually coming in contact with your nasal mucosa. It doesn't matter that they've been burned; they're still effective. Bergner shares: "using an appropriate smudge, close the bath room and take off the clothes, and make the room thick with smudge. Inhale deeply, and also rub the smoke all over the surface of the body. This might be enhanced by steaming the room with a hot shower first."

Even some nonaromatic plants offer their virtues when burned. Both mullein and coltsfoot have been used as smokes to promote expectoration. A student/friend of mine delights on sticking a pipe of mullein into whoever coughs around him; after a few puffs they're really coughing... "But it's a good cough now, getting stuff up now, yeah?" he'll say...

Of course, do factor in smoke detectors if burning herbs indoors. Also, be aware that burning mugwort smells very similar to burning cannabis, which could potentially result in complicated interactions with others (especially badge wearing others).

chest poultices

The use of these types of topical applications is far too infrequent. Yes, they're messy, and yes they're more work to throw together, but they're very effective. Richo Cech, in [Making Plant Medicine](#), tells of just how valuable the common onion can be:

“Somewhere around the middle of the night, Mayche shook me awake. “Sena can't breathe,” she said. I could see in the bare moon and starlight that the little girl's shoulders lifted with each breath, breaths that came hard and rattled in her throat. I remembered how my mother used to hold me in the steam of the kettle to clear my breathing. Then, I thought of something better in the form of an onion poultice... I slid the moist, gooey cloth onto her upper chest and throat, ...and covered the poultice first with a plastic bag and then with a towel and blanket... Sena took an easier breath, then swallowed and took several more breaths, each deeper than the last... within a few more breaths she developed a dreamy expression and settled in (to sleep).”

To make an onion poultice, a minced onion or two is sautéed in just a bit of oil till tender and translucent, then cider (or any other) vinegar is added, and enough ground flaxseed or cornmeal to make it pastey (I always eyeball the proportions). This is then scooped out onto a piece of cloth, and allowed to cool enough to apply to the chest without burning. Cover with something plastic and then blankets to help retain the heat. The warmth and the vapors can dramatically open respiratory passages, and the aromatics and steam, inhaled, will help kill bacteria and viruses in the respiratory tract. Making these is best practiced before you're really desperately in need of it.