

All about Nervines

Jay Bartel

Clinical Herbalist and Holistic Health Educator

Nervine: A nervine is an herb that has a beneficial effect on the nervous system. They are often distinguished in major categories: nervine relaxants, nervine stimulants, and nervine tonics.

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*, aka German chamomile)

Parts used: flowering buds

Uses: Chamomile is my go-to tummy tension plant! It is a mild sedative and gastric anti-inflammatory. It can calm nerves felt in the stomach and helps disperse gas. It also gets used to address conditions such as IBS and peptic ulcers. As a nervine, it is excellent for kids and fussiness at any age. For anxiety held in the gut and facial musculature (tight jaw, tension headaches, etc). Compresses or teabags can also be used topically for rashes or sore muscles.

Taste and energetics: cooling and relaxing

Safety: avoid if allergic to other plants in the Aster family.

Preparation and dosage: Tea: 2-4 grams in a cup of water, up to 4 times per day. Tincture: 1-4 ml up to 3 times per day. Great to use in a bath— put 2-4 grams in cheesecloth or a nut milk strainer bag while running bath water. Glycerin-based preparations can be made for kids or folks who don't use alcohol. Dose is typically 1-5 mls up to 4 times per day.

Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*)

Parts used: flowers and leaves, essential oil

Uses: Lavender is a relaxing nervine that eases tension and anxiety. I think of it as appropriate for perfectionists whose stress looks like muscle tension, self-criticism, insomnia, and irritability. Indicated for panic, anxiety, and stress-related digestive discomforts. It can also help ease grief and heartbreak. It's a fantastic anti-microbial and can be used for cuts and burns.

Taste and energetics: aromatic, slightly bitter, dry, moving

Safety: don't take the essential oil internally.

Preparation and dosage: Smaller doses are more stimulating, whereas larger doses are more sedating. In tea, use 1-2 grams per day (¼ - ½ tsp), infuse covered. In tincture, 2 drops up to 2 mls up to 3 times per day. Maximum daily dose is 6 mls per day. Essential oil can be used diluted in a carrier oil (olive, jojoba, coconut, etc), in a bathtub, or in a spray bottle to diffuse in the air. I love to put dried lavender flowers in cloth sachets to put in a pillow to promote quality sleep.

Milky oats (*Avena sativa*)

Parts used: unripe “milky” seed pods

Uses: I think of milky oats as “nerve food” for longtime use for people with mental and physical exhaustion and are irritable, hypersensitive, lack focus, and have low energy and libido. It can be helpful for people who have difficulty staying asleep due to lack of overall nourishment. Milky oats is great to combine with most other nervines, and has a mild sweet flavor. It has been used historically and more recently in clinical practice to support symptoms of withdrawal from opiates and other substances. Oatstraw, another part of the plant, is also very rich in minerals and fiber which can help to lower “bad” cholesterol.

Taste and energetics: neutral, moistening, nourishing

Safety: caution with gluten sensitivity or allergy; avoid in Celiac disease

Preparation and dosage: Tea: 1 tbsp per cup, infuse in hot water and let sit (covered) overnight. Tincture: 1-3 mls up to 3 times per day.

Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*)

Parts used: leaves and flowers

Uses: Skullcap calms and restores the nervous system. It is used for nervous irritability and restlessness, fear and anticipation, and racing minds accompanied with bodily exhaustion. For excitable, “wired and tired”, hypersensitive pattern seen commonly in many anxiety disorders including OCD. For tension, muscle spasm, twitches and involuntary movements like teeth grinding and restless legs. Can be useful when there is oversensitivity to light, noise, and other stimuli (as in migraines). It is generally useful for pain accompanied with hypersensitivity, as in nerve pain.

Taste and energetics: slightly bitter, cool

Safety: Caution in pregnancy, safe in lactation. Caution with benzodiazepines and with sedative medications, as it may increase their effects.

Preparation and dosage: Tea: 1 tsp per cup. Tincture: 2 ml up to 2 times per day or as needed, up to 15 mls per day. Combines well with milky oats and other nervines such as passionflower and lemon balm.

Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*)

Parts used: leaves and flowers

Taste and energetics: sweet, slightly bitter, cool

Uses: Passionflower is a mild sedative, and can be used on its own or in combination with other herbs for insomnia and restlessness and to quiet mental chatter due to tension, anxiety, stress, and irritability. It can also be used for mild pain relief in tension headaches, menstrual cramps, and teeth grinding.

Safety: Don't use in combo with MAOI, anxiety, and antispasmodic medications, as it can increase their effects.

Preparation and dosage: Tea: 1-2 tsp per cup (steep for 20- 30 minutes), up to 3 times per day. Tincture: 1-5 mls up to 3 times per day; for sleep take 1 tsp at bedtime.

Hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*)

Parts used: leaves and flowers, fruit

Uses: Hawthorn can be used to support the heart and cardiovascular system, both physically and emotionally. Its berries support blood vessel integrity because they are rich in flavonoids and antioxidants; helps to promote blood flow and relax agitation. As a nervine, hawthorn can help promote healthy emotional boundaries. Many rose-family plants have sharp needles that show us how to engage in self protection and containment. Hawthorn leaf and flower are often used to help shift lingering grief and depression due to the loss of a loved one (death, breakups). The flowers are highly anti-inflammatory and drying, whereas the berries are moist and nourishing.

Taste and energetics: astringent, sour, bitter, warm, dry

Safety: Very safe for most people. Caution if using cardiac glycoside medications (Digoxin, Digitoxin); use under the supervision of a doctor, only.

Preparation and dosage: Tea of leaves and flowers: 2 tsp per cup, up to four times per day. Tincture of leaves/flowers or berries: 1-5 mls up to 5 times per day. Berry jams and syrup are also delicious!

Other nervines

Motherwort: relaxing bitter, useful for patterns of emotional volatility, for tension and anxiety accompanied with high blood pressure, heart palpitations, frustration, and anger. Helpful for PMS with nervous tension or “weepiness”, and for people who have difficulty eating when stressed.

Lemon balm: aromatic and uplifting nervine, helps with digestion, lethargy, PMS, and “refreshing” a fatigued mind. Also a potent anti-viral, and can be used to address colds, flus, and viruses such as herpes.

St. John’s Wort: for depression, exhaustion, and fear. Appropriate for “seasonal depression” pattern and recovery from trauma. Contraindicated with many herbs.

Linden: cool, moist, and floral. Mild hypotension, for stress felt in the heart. Soothing for the respiratory tract and can be used for throat pain in colds and flus.

Damiana: libido enhancer, energy boosting. Can be useful in menopause and for folks beginning gender-affirming hormone use.

Wood Betony: quiets mental chatter, helps with headaches and to balance gut-brain connection

Great Resources

The Modern Herbal Dispensatory by Thomas Easley

The Complete Herbal Tutor by Anne McIntyre

Staying Healthy with the Seasons by Elson M. Haas

The Wild Medicine Solution by Guido Masé