

Alive today, thanks to a good surgeon,

Can herbal medicine help keep us well? **Sharon Morrison** meets a herbalist who has no doubts – and who speaks from personal experience. Oh, and read all about ‘leaky gut’, too!

Have you ever heard of the curative powers of milk thistle? People used to take it, and some still do, to prevent the splitting headache and the loss of most of the next day associated with a “good night out”. Drinking less alcohol is more effective, but the seeds of the milk thistle plant, a member of the daisy family, were used as a herbal remedy for liver problems as long ago as the 8th Century BC.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans probably didn’t know that the active ingredient, silymarin, is an anti-oxidant that protects against cell damage, but they knew their plants. And so does Melanie Soomro, medical herbalist and managing director of Essex-based Cliffs Chiropractic Clinic. She is part of a growing band of herbal medicine advocates who use plants, or mixtures of plant extracts, to treat illness.

If you haven’t heard of medical herbalism, you’re not alone. The use of herbs and plants to treat illness is age-old, but medical herbalism is a relative newcomer, gaining official recognition only in 1864, when the National Association of Medical Herbalists (now the National Institute of Medical Herbalists) was established.

This branch of medicine uses plants that have the backing of research and clinical trials. Its qualified practitioners have studied orthodox medicine as well

as plant medicine, and are trained in diagnostic skills.

“Where we differ from GPs is that we take a holistic approach to illness, which means we treat the individual as a whole, not the symptoms, and this enables us to uncover the underlying cause and treat it. And this is not something that can be accomplished in a 10-minute appointment,” says Melanie, who founded Cliffs Chiropractic Clinic in 1994 with Arif Soomro. (www.cliffschiropractorsouthend.co.uk)

The two most common types of herbal medicine used in the UK are Western herbal medicine and Chinese herbal medicine. Melanie says the aim is to restore the body’s natural ability to protect, regulate and heal itself.

Your gut is your ‘second brain’

Often patients come to Melanie after putting up with chronic pain or disorders for years. “Medical herbalism seems to be the final port of call when it comes to resolving health issues, but if people knew of the long term benefits of this kind of treatment, they could be leading happier, more comfortable lives a lot sooner.” One of her patients had

been suffering with debilitating gastrointestinal issues since she was a teenager. The cause of her discomfort – although “discomfort” doesn’t adequately describe the intensity of her pain – could have been down to many things: the severe case of glandular fever she contracted when she was younger, the dysbiosis (an imbalance of good and bad bacteria) in her gut or the development of multiple food intolerances.

Whatever it was, her stomach problems plagued her for years and, despite the many tests she underwent, all of which were negative, she was eventually told she probably had irritable bowel disease (IBS).

“At 16 she’d been effectively written off,” says Melanie. “There was no treatment and no cure, she had IBS and just had to ‘get on with it’. But how do you ‘get on with it’ when the pain’s so severe you can’t go to school or work, or you’re being rushed to Accident & Emergency?”

“She became very intolerant to food and anything she ate disagreed with her. Going out for a meal became very stressful. After a while she stopped going out

Lifestyle, stress, infections, allergies, alcohol and poor diet will all affect the level of good bacteria



■ The milk thistle. Good for a hangover cure?

Photo: CONTRIBUTED

altogether.” As her lifestyle wasn’t in need of rehabilitation – she’d always eaten freshly-cooked, non-processed food and worked out regularly to maintain her health and fitness – it was just a continuing process of eliminating different food groups to see what, if anything, made a difference.

At her first consultation with Melanie she was asked lots of questions and then examined. At the second, she was told she had “leaky gut”.

“The gut is an incredibly important organ,” says Melanie. “It’s often referred to as the ‘second brain’ and, if your gut is healthy, chances are you’re in good health overall. A healthy gut should have the right proportion of good bacteria, which lines and protects the digestive tract from damage and plays an important role in maintaining the immune system.”

“Lifestyle, stress, infections, allergies, alcohol and a poor diet will all affect the level of good bacteria, leaving room for harmful bacteria to proliferate. This leads to a decreased ability to absorb the nutrients from food and an increasing number of allergies develop, which can make you feel quite poorly.”

So: what’s to be done?

The healing process involved listening to each other and working together.

The good news is that one can apparently heal a “leaky gut” using the “5 R Protocol”:

- 1 Remove foods and factors that damage the gut
- 2 Replace with healing foods and digestive enzymes
- 3 Reincubate with probiotics
- 4 Repair with specific supplements
- 5 Rebalance with changes to the diet

The 5 R Protocol is not an instant fix and relies on patient and

practitioner working together. Melanie prescribed a mixture of herbs and nutrients, in tablet form, that her patient would need to take initially to get her gut back on track.

At each subsequent consultation Melanie would adjust the medication according to how her patient was responding. Energy levels were improving day by day and, by the end of May, feeling poorly for most of the week had been reduced to only one or two days in two months.

“After 10 years of stomach pain my patient feels better, calmer. She can even enjoy a meal out, which may seem quite minor to some, but to all of us it’s a major triumph.”

Medical herbalism and cancer

Medical herbalism also has its place in the treatment of cancer, it’s said.

A study by Cancer Research UK in 2014 found that people with cancer mostly took herbal medicines to take back some control and responsibility for themselves and their disease.

They also thought the therapies would not cause side-effects, and here Melanie can speak from her own experience.

“I was diagnosed with bowel cancer in 2005 and had surgery and chemotherapy. During this time I used a lot of herbs to protect and heal my body. I am sure this is how I managed to carry on as normal all the way through my treatment, and had fewer side-effects than most.”

“However, I suffered with tiredness, poor memory and pins and needles in my hands and feet for several years after. In fact, my memory is still not what it was. Now I take a concoction of herbs to keep me in good health and I attribute the fact that I am alive today to a good surgeon, lots of love and support from many people, and my herbs!”



■ Above, a selection of things used in herbal medicine. Right and far right, Melanie Soomro

Photos: CONTRIBUTED

lots of love *and my herbs!*

What makes a gut 'leak'?

The gut is permeable to small molecules, so it can absorb vital nutrients. However, the normally-tight junctions between the cells of the intestinal wall can be damaged by infections, toxins, stress, bad diet and age. Once these tight junctions get broken apart, you have a "leaky gut".

This leads to toxins, microbes and food particles escaping from your intestines and travelling throughout your body via the bloodstream. The immune system marks these as foreign invaders and attacks them.

The immune response to

these invaders can appear in the form of any of these signs:

1. Bloating, diarrhoea, irritable bowel syndrome
2. Allergies
3. Hormonal imbalances
4. Autoimmune diseases
5. Chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia
6. Mood and mind issues such as depression, anxiety
7. Skin issues such as acne, rosacea or eczema
8. Candida overgrowth
9. Food allergies

■ If you think you might have a leaky gut, see your GP or seek the advice of a qualified medical herbalist.

