RA Herb Research Promising, but Inconclusive

by PATRICIA BRATIANU

Thunder God Vine for RA Treatment

The root of a plant known as thunder god vine, Tripterygium wilfordii, has been the subject of several investigations for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

Traditional Chinese medicine practitioners have used thunder god vine medicinally for thousands of years. Modern practitioners usually recommend that the extract be consumed three times daily for the treatment of RA.

Proponents state that the extract relieves pain and inflammation related to autoimmune disorders, such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. The extract appears to work by diminishing the actions of the immune system.

Results of Scientific Studies

Three small clinical trials have been conducted on the use of thunder god vine.

Thunder God Vine vs Sulfasalazine

A 2009 study compared the use of the plant extract with the drug sulfasalazine, a standard treatment for RA. It was a small study of just over 120 people.

The extract recipients were provided with 60mg of the extract three times daily for six months. The sulfasalazine group received 1g of medication twice daily. The plant extract group responded better than the drug recipient group, with researchers finding that the herbal extract reduced symptoms faster than the drug, and produced fewer side effects.

The extract recipients experienced a reduction in pain, swelling, and inflammation and felt better overall. Their biochemical markers for the condition improved.

Thunder God Vine Extract vs Methotrexate

Methotrexate does not work for all people who have RA. It causes many serious side effects and is often poorly tolerated. Doses of methotrexate vary, and practitioners in Western countries often use higher doses than those in China.

Practitioners in a Chinese hospital in Beijing use thunder god vine extract to treat approximately 20,000 people each year.

In 2014, a Chinese study compared the efficacy of thunder god vine with methotrexate, a disease-modifying antirheumatic drug. DMARDS are commonly employed to relieve RA symptoms and stop the progression of the disease. They conducted the 24-week research project in order to evaluate the effectiveness of using the herbal

extract, methotrexate, or combination of both products for pain management.

The researchers determined that the herbal extract worked as well as methotrexate. Individuals who received the medication as well as the herbal extract had the best results.

Recipients of the herbal extract received 20mg of root extract by mouth three times daily. Methotrexate recipients received 7.5mg of methotrexate weekly, which was then increased to 12.5 mg of the drug weekly, over a four-week period. The methotrexate recipients were also provided with 10mg of folic acid weekly. The combination group received methotrexate, folic acid, and the thunder god vine extract.

Out of 207 participants, 174 completed the study. Out of the 174 people, 55% of the thunder god vine extract and 46% of the methotrexate group met the predetermined measurement for successful treatment. Almost 77% of the combination group had success.

The researchers concluded that the thunder god vine extract was not inferior to methotrexate. They determined that the combination therapy was most effective. Researchers in this study considered the use of thunder vine to be safe and effective.

Thunder God Vine Side Effects

A 2006 study indicated that while thunder god vine does improve symptoms of RA, it also produces serious side effects including infertility in some individuals. The study found thunder god vine root extract could cause nausea, vomiting, skin reactions, and an array of other untoward reactions.

The leaves and flowers of the plant are toxic and can cause death. Since the herb has immune suppressant actions, the likelihood of contracting serious infections increases among users of the extract. Menses may cease among women who take the root extract. Infertility in men may be temporary.

The herb should not be used except under the supervision of a highly qualified expert. It interacts with medications, including steroids, which are commonly used to treat RA.

Use of Thunder God Vine for RA Treatment

More and larger studies are needed to evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of thunder god vine. The plant has the potential to cause serious side effects so it should not be used except under the supervision of a highly qualified practitioner.

In my opinion, there is not enough information available regarding safety. I would also want to ensure that the herb is correctly identified and only the root used. This is one case where a standardized, professionally prepared extract is needed.

Use of Thunder God Vine for RA Treatment

The studies have only been conducted for short periods, so long-term safety has not been established, and all of the research projects have been conducted on very small numbers of people. Hopefully large, long-term studies will be undertaken in the near future to determine what doses of the extract are the most effective, yet safe.

Research is also needed to determine the best dose of methotrexate to use if the extract and herb are given simultaneously. The herbal extract should not be given to children who have arthritis.

In my opinion, it is too soon to recommend the use of the extract. I say this reluctantly, because I am well aware of the lack of effectiveness and serious side effects that current therapies offer.

My daughter-in-law has RA and has not responded to conventional treatment so I will be sure to follow the research about this herb. I will report my findings as they become available.

In the meantime there are some other herbs which can be safely and effectively used to relieve RA symptoms.

Types of Herbal Remedies which Relieve RA Symptoms

- **Anti-inflammatory herbs relieve swelling and promote comfort.** They help to improve flexibility and support motion within joints. Wild yam, black cohosh, meadowsweet, birch, and angelica are examples of herbs that relieve inflammation.
- **Nervines promote muscle relaxation and relieve spasms.** People who have RA live with a chronic condition. As a result, depression and anxiety is common. Nervines can lift the mood and relieve stress related to the condition. Black cohosh is an excellent nervine, as well as anti-inflammatory herb. Lemon balm is useful for depression. Linden, chamomile, and red clover are soothing. Valerian is a powerful nervine that can help with insomnia.
- **Topical herbal remedies are beneficial.** Herbal compresses and poultices may be applied to sore and inflamed joints in order to promote comfort. Cold or warm compresses may be used. Peppermint and birch are cooling and soothing when applied topically. Black tea possesses astringent actions. In general, cold applications relieve swelling while warm ones may improve movement. You may need to experiment to see what works best for you.

Herbal remedies are a beneficial part of a comprehensive program to make living with RA easier. It is too soon to recommend the use of thunder god vine, although the research seems promising. In the meantime, other herbs may be used internally and externally to provide some support.