

Terminology of herbal medicine in Cochrane systematic reviews

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Background

The number of Cochrane reviews on herbs is increasing. Understanding terms commonly used in herbal intervention provides a foundation for people new to herbs and reinforces the basics for those with some experience with herbal medicine. A proper use of terminology regarding herbs is one of the key elements to ensure clarification, completeness of searching, and quality of reporting of herbal interventions in systematic reviews.

Objectives

To better understand the terms and words used in herb reviews and try to improve appropriate use of terminology and better reporting of systematic reviews on herbs.

Method

All Cochrane systematic reviews on herbs including protocols published in The Cochrane Library (Issue 1, 2005) were identified using both MeSH and free text terms. We also searched the World Health Organization (WHO) documentation on herbal medicine.

Results

Sixty-seven Cochrane reviews have been identified on herbs, including 31 reviews and 36 protocols. The intervention varied from herbal therapy (usually of many herbs), single herbs to active ingredients from herbs. There was an inconsistency in describing herbal interventions in the reviews, and many different terms have been used to describe 'herbal medicine'.

The terms used included:

- Chinese herbal medicine
- Chinese medicinal herbs
- traditional Chinese medicinal herbs
- Chinese herbs
- herbal therapies
- herbal preparations
- herbal remedies
- herbal products
- medicinal herbs
- medicinal plant, and
- phytomedicine (phytotherapy)

For single herb, the terms used included:

- commercial (trade) name of the herbal product (e.g., Cernilton, for flower pollen extract),
- botanical Latin name (e.g., *Pygeum africanum*),
- pharmaceutical name (e.g., *Radix Ginseng*),
- English name (e.g., green tea for *Camellia sinensis*),
- indigenous name such as Chinese spelling (*Pinyin*) name (e.g., 'Huangqi' for *Astragalus membranaceus*).

Herbs were supplied in different forms: teas, decoction (oral liquid), pills, capsules, tablets, syrups, oils, tinctures, and injections.

Crude plant material such as leaves, flowers, fruit, seed, stems, wood, bark, roots, rhizomes or other plant parts, which may be entire, fragmented or powdered.

WHO documentations on herbal medicine:

- General Guidelines for Methodologies on Research and Evaluation of Traditional Medicine
- Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Herbal Medicines
- Research Guidelines for Evaluating the Safety and Efficacy of Herbal Medicines
- Herbal Medicine for Human Health
- Guidelines for Herbal ATC Classification (*the Uppsala Monitoring Centre, 2004*)

WHO

General guidelines for methodologies on research , herbal medicine was categorized as herbs, herbal materials, herbal preparations and finished herbal products.

Nomenclature in the Herbal ATC system:

A crude drug should be designated by the complete Latin name of the plant (*in italics*) from which the crude drug is derived, followed by the English name (in singular form) of the plant part constituting the crude drug. E.g.

Glycyrrhiza glabra L., root

Definition of herbal medicine

(Barnes, Br J Clin Pharmacol 2003;55:226-33):

preparations made from plants or plant parts. In some instances (e.g., use by herbalists), crude drug (e.g. dried leaf) is used. Manufactured products use extracts of plants or plant parts, formulated as, e.g. tablets, capsules, creams, tinctures. They may contain a single or multiple herbal ingredients.

ESCOP (European Scientific Co-operative on phytotherapy):

medicinal products containing as active ingredients only plants, parts of plants or plant materials, or combinations thereof, whether in the crude or processed state (www.escop.com)

Chinese herbal medicine

Category

- Herbal mixture (composed of more than 2 herbs typically 6-8 herbs used as decoction) usually prescribed by TCM practitioners;
- Chinese patent medicine (based on Chinese classical formula) officially approved and manufactured by pharmaceutical companies;
- Herbal products (active ingredients extracted from single herb or from several herbs in the form of tablets, capsules, or injection)

Terminology

No consensus. Herb(s) in Latin botanical name+efficacy (or Target organs)+preparation forms (pill, tablet, decoction, powder, etc)+number of herbs [eCAM 2004;1(2):125-32]

Conclusion:

- There is no consensus on terms used for herbs.
- 'herbal medicine' is the most commonly used term

Recommendation:

- terms for herbal interventions used in the Cochrane review should be clearly defined
- For single herb, botanical Latin name + plant part used (or at least pharmaceutical name) should be used, e.g. *Ginkgo biloba L., leaf* ; *Artemisia absinthium L., herb*
- For herbal mixture, composition of individual herbs needs to be reported.

Thank you!

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