

# Natural pain relief

We live in a fortunate age where we have easy access to pain-relieving pills; however, they do have side effects. Naturopath **Tania Flack** explores safer alternatives.

**P**opping a tablet for a headache or period pain is so commonplace we don't really think about it; after all, pain medication is safe, right? Common pain medication may be safe when taken as directed; however, they can have harmful effects on the body. For example, paracetamol directly depletes the action of glutathione in the liver and can cause liver damage when taken in high doses. Anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen can cause significant disruption to the delicate lining of the digestive tract, while stronger over-the-counter pain medications containing codeine are also often misused, some people may even develop a physical dependence, due to its opiate-like effects.

Pain comes in many guises: the continuous ache of arthritis, the low-grade throb of a dull headache, or the cramping pain that some women experience with their period. Obviously the best way to address pain is to try to address its cause, but this can take time or may just not be possible, as in the case of chronic degenerative conditions. Natural medicines can provide relief for acute pain and can be used to help manage chronic pain.

## Sprains and strains

Whether it's a twisted ankle, a sporting injury or you've knocked your shin on the car bumper bar, sprains, strains and bruises

are common injuries that fall into the category of acute pain. First aid for these types of injuries should always start with rest, ice, compression, and elevation. These all minimise inflammation and pain and allow the body to begin the repair process. Ice numbs the pain, however, so never apply ice directly from the freezer to the skin - always wrap it in a damp cloth to prevent ice burn. Once this has been done use these options to reduce pain and speed healing.

**Arnica:** This herbal remedy has been used through the ages to treat swelling, bruising, and inflammation. Research shows that it selectively inhibits inflammatory mediators. It can be taken orally as a homeopathic or used in a topical cream applied directly to the bruise. Clinical trials show that using the homeopathic and topical preparations together significantly reduces pain.

**Vitamin C and bioflavonoids:** Vitamin C and bioflavonoids, such as quercetin and bromelain, are nutrients found in citrus fruit and pineapple. They have significant anti-inflammatory properties and, when taken together, help to mop up inflammation, reduce pain, and promote healing in soft tissue.

## Backache

This is a common problem and can be due to postural imbalance, muscle strain or an underlying structural problem. If

backache is a regular occurrence, it must be assessed by a practitioner specialising in spinal health.

**Spinal care:** Although it's hard to group three distinctly different modalities together, it is safe to say that osteopathy, physiotherapy, and chiropractic care are all excellent therapies for backache. Gently manipulating the spine and mobilising soft tissues can be the fastest way to get relief. This type of care also provides the benefit of thorough assessment, which can prevent further pain and injury.

**90**  
The percentage decrease in reported acute back pain by patients who regularly used comfrey cream.



## Acupressure for headaches



**Massage:** The healing touch of a remedial massage therapist can provide significant pain relief, particularly in the case of muscle tension. Massage relieves pain by increasing blood flow, reducing congestion in soft tissue, and releasing muscle tension.

**Yoga and Pilates:** While yoga and Pilates may not be the ideal therapy for acute back pain, there is no question that, under the supervision of a qualified instructor, both forms of movement can relieve chronic back pain and help to prevent recurrence.

**Comfrey:** Once known as 'boneset', comfrey has been traditionally used to ease pain and promote healing. It contains a compound that simultaneously stimulates tissue repair and decreases inflammation. Several clinical trials have investigated its effects: in one study, it was reported to be as effective as Voltaren (Diclofenac) gel for pain relief.

## Headaches and migraines

Whether it's the dull throb of a tension headache or the blinding pain of a migraine, headaches are a common reason why people reach for pain medication. Sufferers of regular headaches and migraines often have a high intake of painkillers, which over time may have a negative effect on their health. There are several effective natural remedies that can help to relieve and prevent headaches.

**Magnesium:** Sometimes described as 'the miracle mineral', this has significant benefits for headache sufferers. Changes in blood vessel diameter in the brain cause the throbbing associated with migraine and headache; magnesium helps to control this while relaxing the muscles around the head and neck. Magnesium deficiency contributes to headaches and migraines, and studies show that migraine sufferers have low brain levels of magnesium during an attack. Chronic migraine sufferers who take regular magnesium supplements can reduce the frequency of attacks by 41 percent.

**Acupressure:** This ancient technique uses gentle pressure applied to specific points, which stimulate the release of the body's natural pain relieving neurochemicals, endorphins (see box on top left of this page "Acupressure points for headaches"). Studies show that regular acupressure provided better relief for headaches than regular muscle relaxant medication. Bonus: you can do it yourself at the onset of a headache to control symptoms.

**Lavender:** Who doesn't love the scent of fresh lavender? Lavender essential oil has a soothing effect on the nervous system and is ideal for treating tension headaches. Studies confirm its analgesic and anti-inflammatory properties. A cloth dipped into cool water with a few drops of essential oil can be applied to the forehead to help relieve headaches.

**Meditation:** Meditation, mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be used by anyone to help control pain and are especially useful for treating and preventing headaches and migraine. Meditation alters our perception of pain and can significantly decrease stress hormones and inflammatory mediators that contribute to pain. Plus, once you learn it, you can meditate anywhere, so you'll have a pain-relieving technique to employ at the first sign of a headache.

## Toothache

Local anaesthetic is without a doubt a blessing when it comes to undergoing invasive dental procedures. However, that nagging pain that you may experience while waiting for your next dental appointment can be significantly relieved with some simple natural medicine strategies.

**Ginger tea:** This is one of the most effective pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory herbs we have, due to its effects on prostaglandin release. Gently swirl the warm tea around the mouth and across the affected area, and pain will slowly start to ease. Keep sipping the tea until pain is manageable. This is also an excellent treatment for the pain of a sore throat or sinus infection.

**Clove oil:** This old-fashioned remedy was once all that we had to relieve toothache and it still stands the test of time. Cloves contain eugenol, which has proven analgesic and antiseptic properties. A few drops of clove oil applied to the affected area can relieve pain. If you don't have the oil handy, you could make clove tea. Lightly crush whole cloves and add hot water, allow it to steep for seven minutes, and then swirl gently around your mouth.

## Nerve pain

Nerve pain can be excruciating, and it doesn't necessarily respond well to standard pain medication. Nerve pain usually follows a defined path across the body, be it the shooting pain down the legs caused by sciatica or the constant irritating pain around the side of the body or face caused by an attack of shingles.

**St John's wort:** Probably best known for its antidepressant effects; however its effects on the nervous system are more far-reaching. Specialised compounds, namely hypericin and hyperforin, provide relief from nerve pain due to anti-inflammatory and direct analgesic effect on the nervous system,

## Ease the ache

Arthritis affects 3.85 million Australians and is one of the leading causes of disability and chronic pain. Pain, inflammation, and joint degeneration caused by arthritis can lead to loss of mobility and a significant decrease in quality of life, so managing pain and inflammation is crucial. Natural medicine can be used alongside standard pain relief medication under professional supervision if needed.

**Fish oils:** Omega-3 essential fatty acids are renowned for their anti-inflammatory effects. Fish oils contain two main constituents, docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). EPA is the major anti-inflammatory constituent and directly down-regulates inflammation. Fish oils have been shown in clinical trials to reduce pain, increase mobility and decrease the duration of morning stiffness associated with arthritis. While it is important to eat fresh fish, arthritis sufferers also need to supplement; Arthritis Australia recommends 2.7 grams of fish oil (containing both EPA and DHA) to manage the pain and inflammation of arthritis.

**Turmeric:** Considered a sacred spice throughout Asia, turmeric is used widely for culinary, medicinal and religious purposes, and with good reason! The major therapeutic constituents, curcuminoids, have remarkable health benefits including potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects. Animal studies confirm turmeric is more effective than some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and has direct anti-arthritis effects. Professionally prescribed, high dose

turmeric supplements can be useful in managing arthritic pain. Adding turmeric to the daily diet will also down-regulate inflammation.

**Anti-inflammatory herbs:** There are a wealth of powerful anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving herbal medicines containing compounds that down-regulate inflammatory pathways in the body, so relieving pain and reducing joint damage. They include boswellia, cat's claw, willow bark and devil's claw. Herbal medicines should be professionally prescribed for the individual.

**Tai chi:** Moving is often the last thing arthritis sufferers feel like doing; pain, stiffness and joint restriction can cause them to avoid exercise. However, controlled movement can make a big impact on the level of pain experienced. Tai chi is a gentle form of exercise based on martial arts principles that involves flowing movements which stimulate the movement of qi, or life force, around the body. This promotes relaxation, stimulates blood flow, releases endorphins and helps maintain strength and flexibility. Regular tai chi has been shown to help manage chronic arthritis pain.



## Paracetamol, the most widely used over-the-counter pain medication in Australia, is responsible for more overdose-related hospital admissions than any other drug.

acting on opioid pathways. St John's wort may interfere with some medications, so it should be professionally prescribed.

**Acupuncture:** One of the oldest treatments known to man, acupuncture is suitable for many types of pain, including nerve pain. Like acupressure, acupuncture stimulates the flow of qi, or life force, rebalancing the body and changing our perception of pain. It stimulates endorphin release and is so effective people have even used it to undergo minor medical procedures.

## Period pain

This can be a common occurrence for some women, especially in teenage girls,

perimenopausal women and any woman suffering from endometriosis.

**Homeopathy:** There are several excellent remedies: Caulophyllum is useful for spasmodic, labour-like pains; Cimicifuga is prescribed for sharp pain; Belladonna can be used for congested heavy pain, which starts before the period; and Pulsatilla and Sepia can help to regulate the cycle. A qualified practitioner will prescribe the most effective remedy.

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## Tania's pain-relieving tea

Take one large thumb-sized knob of fresh ginger. Grate it finely, place it in a pot and pour over 500ml of boiling filtered water. Steep for seven minutes. Sip tea until the pain starts to subside.