

HEALTHY AT HOME, by Tieraona Low Dog, M.D.
A Book Report and Comment, by David G. Schwartz, M.D.

How is home-based plant medicine important? If it can save us from complications of conventional medical care, it can be invaluable. Commonly conventional medicine admonishes us that natural medicine could be dangerous if it delays getting regular (FDA-approved) medical care. My premise turns this statement on its head by saying that natural medicine could prevent injury or death if the “approved” medical care is avoided, especially when someone well qualified in conventional medicine and in traditional plant medicine like Dr. Low Dog gives specific guidelines about when to seek conventional medical care, when to go for emergency care, and when to stay with home treatments.

The following is my explanation (not Dr. Low Dog’s explicit commentary) for relying on natural methods whenever appropriate as much as possible before utilizing standard medical treatment. If you have read my previous papers on about medical care, you may understand this rationale:

Stay healthy. Have healthful habits, activities, and attitudes such as exercise, sleep, good food, supportive relationships, spirituality, stress management, humor, purposeful living, a positive attitude, following common sense safety measures, etc.

Choose judiciously when to use the medical system. Appropriate times to use the conventional medical-surgical model are: 1. Acute illnesses and injuries that can be life-threatening or could cause permanent disability. 2. Adjunct treatment for chronic life-threatening or disabling conditions such as cancer, heart disease, etc., along with natural therapies. 3. Prenatal care, early childhood screenings, and some vaccinations. 4. Physical medicine, physical therapy, and rehabilitation, 5. Preventive checkups such as blood pressure, weight, blood sugar, genetic tests related to family history, other blood tests that are biomarkers for chronic illnesses, pap smears according to age and lifestyles, colon screening, and some others recommended by the U.S Preventive Task Force. Some of the above screenings can be done at home. 6. Hospice for end of life care.

Many of the screening tests previously recommended are now falling out of favor by many conventional expert panels. The annual physical exam for healthy people, self-breast exam, physician breast exam, annual pap smears for all women, annual mammograms for all women over 40, PSA (Prostatic Specific Antigen), and Lung CT scans are all coming under question or are no longer recommended for people with no symptoms.

The main reason for this scrutiny is that sometimes more people are harmed by these practices because they can lead to invasive procedures, injuries, and death. Sometimes it starts with a test showing a small, previously unnoticed abnormality (which we all may have), from there a chain of tests and investigations, one leading to the next, from simple and innocuous to more complex and invasive tests.

Another area of prevention involves the extreme financial pressure by the pharmaceutical companies to develop blockbuster drugs that, according to controlled trials, presumably reduce risk of some chronic disease, with unknown consequences of decades of consumption of these drugs in the usual mainstream of real life. Cholesterol-lowering drugs could be one such example.

Also a huge pipeline of vaccine development is moving along, which promises better financial return than the increasingly saturated market for drugs. This cavalier attitude that we can make a vaccine for every major infection and not reap untoward consequences years or decades later is fraught with danger.

Conventional medical information reports that the connection between vaccines and autism is non-existent, yet the issue remains controversial. Multitudes of parents who are well-educated and thoughtful, who do careful literature searches, who can hardly be described as superstitious or ignorant, continue to question the conclusions from those studies and want fewer vaccines spaced farther apart. Still unanswered is why the Amish have no cases of autism and use no vaccines. A rational policy on the proper use of vaccines is yet to be developed.

The other area of caution besides “preventive medicine” is the widespread use of over-the-counter drugs, resulting in thousands of deaths every year from ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and others, while injuries and deaths from herbs and food supplements are rare.

So what does all this have to do with Dr. Low Dog’s book? My point in all this caution about conventional medicine is because we are trained to think, “Consult your doctor,” like a knee-jerk reaction as the first thing that comes to mind, without carefully considering the consequences. It is the mainstream thinking to which we are expected to conform, and it takes courage to break out from it. I want people to think carefully about their health care and their sources of information and to consider a wholly different paradigm in thinking about health. Healthy at Home is an example of an author showing such careful thinking when giving advice about when to do home treatments with use of plant medicines and when to go to a hospital or to see a practitioner trained in conventional medicine.

Dr. Tieraona Low Dog, M.D. has had years of experience with plant medicine from childhood on, and has a solid training and experience in mainstream, conventional, “allopathic” medicine. Consequently, she has developed outstanding wisdom in this area, and she gives guidelines in her book for every condition or symptom, considering whether it needs medical professional care or not.

She covers ailments of several major systems of the body, including respiratory, nervous, and digestive systems and the skin, as well as infections in general, and a special section on women’s health care.

She explains how to grow, harvest, and purchase herbs and how to stock an herbal “medicine cabinet.” The book is full of ‘down-to-earth” practical guidance for anyone who wants to develop knowledge and expertise in home care methods. She details growing fresh herbs at home in gardens or flower pots, buying fresh herbs commonly available in supermarkets, harvesting and preserving herbs, and purchasing tinctures of herbal concentrates. This includes making teas, cold and hot infusions, tinctures, salves, and compresses.

In the chapter on infections the author discusses the causes of infections, the body’s defenses, antibiotic resistance, and ways of strengthening the immune system. Supports for the immune system include garlic, onions, leeks, astragalus, shiitake, maitake, and reishi mushrooms, probiotics, zinc, and vitamin C. She gives recipes for soups and syrups. Warning signs for when a child with an infection needs urgent medical attention are: sudden onset of fever with pain in a leg or joint, high fever with red rash that remains colored after pressing on it, fever accompanied by stiff neck and extreme lack of energy, pain persistent or worsening despite home treatment, severe abdominal pain, especially worsened with vibration, bloody diarrhea or vomiting, stool that looks like grape jelly, difficulty breathing or noisy breathing, inability to keep down fluids enough to urinate every 7 hours, and any baby under 2 months of age that has rectal temperature 100.4 or higher (and not having recently received a vaccine). Situations in which a phone call to a health care provider or clinic is advisable are: if an otherwise healthy adult or child has a fever of 103 degrees F or higher, and when any fever lasts longer than 3 days. This is an example of her thorough coverage of deciding which kind of care to seek.

Regarding problems with the respiratory system: keep things moist with a humidifier, nasal rinses, and aromatherapy, use steam and compresses with eucalyptus, oregano, peppermint, and rosemary, make herbal teas with ginger, honey, and lemon, and take Echinacea. Cough remedies include fresh thyme with a lemon and honey cough syrup, a marshmallow root infusion, slippery elm lozenges, and a grindelia compound tincture used in a honey syrup, which includes grindelia, horehound, licorice, and yerba santa.

For ear infections in which a child is pulling on an ear and crying inconsolable and temperature is around 103 degrees F for 2 days it would be best to take the child to the doctor, but for temp. 101 or less for 1 day, with a little fussiness but otherwise normal, medical treatment is not needed. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends waiting for 2-3 days before using an antibiotic for an ear infection to see if it goes away on its own. Going to the doctor could result in being sent home without an antibiotic anyway. The Centers For Disease Control has a Get Smart section on its website, www.cdc.gov, that helps in deciding when to use antibiotics.

Ways of treating the ear infection at home include nasal irrigation, Echinacea, zinc and vitamin C, and ear oil with mullein flowers, garlic, and/or St. Johns wort oil. Measures to prevent ear infections include breast-feeding, removing dairy products from the diet, avoiding pacifiers, and using nasal irrigations and probiotics. External ear infections (in ear canal) that are mild and not accompanied by a fever can respond to vinegar/water (equal portions) drops in the ear.

Sore throats that are not likely to be due to strep but a virus instead (no fever, spots in throat, headache, or body aches, but accompanied by nasal symptoms of a cold) can benefit from sage gargle and Echinacea tincture.

Routine nasal allergies (with no wheezing, swelling, hives, or vomiting) can respond to nasal irrigation, quercetin, butterbur, and nettle leaves.

For the nervous system: peppermint, rosemary, and ginger instead of caffeine do not over-stimulate or raise heart rate or blood pressure. They can improve alertness, focus, and concentration. To relax and handle stress and mild anxiety, lemon balm, valerian, California poppy, and hops are helpful. When “on edge” and irritable, skullcap can calm the nerves. St John’s wort can assist in mild depression. Herbal adaptogens such as ginseng, rhodiola, and ashwaganda can help to ease the effects of long-term stress on the body.

For gastrointestinal problems: checking for food intolerances, using digestive enzymes, probiotics, and bitter herbs such as dandelion, gentian, chamomile, and fennel, and taking demulcents (mucilaginous herbs) such as deglycerrhizinaated licorice and slippery elm bark can provide relief for a variety of digestive disorders. For intestinal infections and parasites, berberine-rich herbs such as barberry, Oregon grape root, or goldenseal can help (not to be used in pregnancy).

The author devotes a chapter to a variety of skin problems, and a chapter to women’s medicine, both loaded with information too plentiful to summarize adequately here.

I have touched on the high points of Dr. Low Dog’s discussion of various health problems to give a sampling of her practical knowledge and wisdom.

She recommends 18 essential remedies every home should have on hand. Tinctures: arnica, barberry or Oregon grape root, cramp bark, Echinacea, gindelila compound, herbal bitter aperitif, licorice, uva-ursi, corn silk, and Witch Hazel. Glycerites: German chamomile, and Echinacea. Oils: calendula flower, mullein flower, and St. John’s wort. Honeys: Thyme and sage. Topicals: Oatmeal relief, and Natural Anti-Inflammatory Cream.

She also recommends stocking up on the basics for first aid, bandages, etc., kitchen equipment and items for preparing plant medicine, and 27 herbs. She gives resources for purchasing supplies and herbs, and a materia medica, a detailed description of 32 various herbs.

There are many books written on home self care and many herbal and nutritional manuals, but none have I yet found to measure up to Dr. Low Dog’s standard of practical wisdom for the average family, based on traditional wisdom and experience, and on scientific research. I was delighted to discover the recent publication of this treasure whose time has come.

I would like to conclude this discussion with a quote from Thomas A. Edison, cited by the author on page 278:

“Until man duplicates a blade of grass, nature can laugh at his so-called scientific knowledge. Remedies from chemicals will never stand in favor compared with the products of nature, the living cell of a plant, the final result of the rays of the sun, the mother of all life.”