

Cramp Bark Eases Vexing Stomach Aches and Monthly Cramps

By [Suzy Cohen](#) on December 6, 2016 in [Gastrointestinal](#), [Hormone](#), [Women's Health](#).

Last week I was tearing apart my kitchen cabinet looking for asafoetida spice, when my eye fell on a screw-top glass jar filled with little chunks of brown “cramp” bark. I confess my kitchen pantry resembles Aladdin’s cave of precious herbs and spices. Some of these I keep for medicinal reasons, and others are to season recipes. Most of time there is overlap because everything I cook is medicinally infused somehow.

So this is how I came to use cramp bark. It felt like synchronicity, because my husband Sam was complaining of stomach cramps that afternoon. And here I had just found a glass jar containing cramp bark in my cabinet. I threw a tablespoon of the little pieces of broken-up bark into a saucepan and added about 2 cups of water. Then I set it to simmer for 10 minutes, after which I presented Sam with a steaming cramp bark infusion, sweetened with honey. Call it cramp bark tea, although the recipe can change based upon desired potency.

Within 10 minutes, it completely relieved his vexing stomach ache and we were both a little surprised. He fell asleep peacefully. (Note to self: Give him this stuff tomorrow night when he crawls in to bed at midnight replaying the presidential debate on his iPhone).

Herbalists know this herb can relax smooth muscles, like those of the intestines, bladder, and uterus, as well as striated muscle, such as skeletal muscle.

What is cramp bark exactly?

Cramp bark (botanical name *Viburnum opulus*) is a tall-growing shrub which comes from the honeysuckle family. It is native to England and Scotland, and can also be found in the US, Canada, Asia and north Africa. The vivid-colored berries of cramp bark can be used to make red ink. The bark itself is harvested in the spring and the autumn and then dried out and used for medicinal purposes, including: Arthritic pain, back ache, menstrual cramps, cramping due to irritable bowel syndrome, urinary pain, and muscle spasms (such as a cricked neck). Because of its calming effect on the nervous system, cramp bark has even been used as a mild sedative for nervous tension.

One of the most popular uses for cramp bark is to provide relief from monthly menstrual pain. The discomfort ranges from blessedly mild, to requiring narcotics (hydrocodone) or non-steroidals (naproxen or ibuprofen) just to get through ‘that time of the month’. Cramp bark can ‘unwind’ uterine tension.

The suffering can be chronic...

For those of you suffering from regular or chronic pain caused by spasms, back pain or monthly cramps, consider adding cramp bark to your herbal medicine cabinet. Ask a holistic doctor first. I'd avoid conventional prescribed painkillers for as long as you can, because they have highly undesirable side effects including heart disease, constipation, neuronal degeneration and/or addiction... plus the way I see it, you are just removing one problem and ushering in new ones.

If you follow me regularly you will know that painkillers can bring some undesirable side effects, removing one problem and ushering in new ones. For those with the most severe pain, prescription opiate painkillers such as hydrocodone, morphine, codeine and oxycodone are thankfully very effective but I don't recommend them for more than a couple of weeks time. These drugs are never to be used chronically for this type of pain.

Prescription opiate painkillers

These medications make people feel good because they provide a temporary rush of endorphins, especially dopamine, which is one reason they are so addictive. The problem is that our own endogenous levels of dopamine and other neurotransmitters get 'drug mugged' by opiates over time. As neurotransmitter levels become depleted over time, you may develop feelings of depression, anxiety, and then emotional numbness can follow. See here to learn more about how opioids can also kill your pleasure. [CLICK HERE](#) To read.

Over-the-counter painkillers

These medications have the ability to impact the body in different ways so again, they're okay but short-term use only. NSAIDS or Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like naproxen, ibuprofen and ketoprofen can bring swift pain relief, and as a nation we pop billions of these pills each year. There's almost always a little case of Advil in my purse for occasional use.

NSAIDs reduce inflammation by inhibiting the production of hormone-like prostaglandins, which are responsible for fever, inflammation and pain. The problem is that prostaglandins aren't always bad, they are necessary for life. Prostaglandins play a myriad of other vital roles, including protecting our stomach lining from the gastric acids we secrete to digest our foods; this means that if we take more NSAIDs than our gut can handle we can wind up with an ulcer, or with leaky gut.

Leaky gut, which is the term for a colon that has increased intestinal permeability, means that your likelihood of suffering from food intolerances goes up. Leaky gut is now being recognized as one of the underlying factors in the development of autoimmune disease.

Acetaminophen or paracetamol

This medication is sold OTC and is another very popular analgesic. It may be a better choice for people with heart conditions or hypertension. It has the ability to use up a potent liver antioxidant called glutathione which breaks down hydrogen peroxide (so does Catalase enzyme).

Our glutathione status has major implications for every organ system in our body, and we need glutathione to protect us from free radical damage and build up of toxic heavy metals so if you take a lot of this medication, be sure to supplement with glutathione or NAC which might help cook up some glutathione in your cells. Acetaminophen can sometimes be hard on your liver for this reason (it's stealing your favorite liver antioxidant), and so higher than recommended doses can result in liver damage. I would not take more than 3 or 4 grams per day.

Correct Pain Management is Vital

No one should have to put up with chronic pain if there are good analgesics out there. There may be times when we absolutely need prescribed and/or over-the-counter painkillers. But let's keep our eyes wide open to the potential side-effects, and I strongly encourage you to at least test out natural alternatives like cramp bark. Your body will thank you in the long-run if it works for you. Of course ask your physician about natural remedies too, because everything has a downside. I couldn't possibly know what's right for everyone here.

Using Cramp Bark

Cramp bark is widely available in the form of tinctures and capsules. These come with recommended doses you can follow, and are handy to slip in your purse. You could also do what I did and get hold of some dried cramp bark from a herbal supplier to make your own decoctions (I love this word!).

A decoction is when you boil up a hard substance like bark or seeds in water, to extract all the good medicinal components. You prepare your decoction by taking a stainless steel pan and measuring out around one half to one whole tablespoon of dried cramp bark for every cup of water. Some herbalists recommend 2 tablespoons per cup but you shouldn't start with that, as it will likely be too strong and cause side effects. Always start with the lowest effective dose, even if it's with an herb. Simmer for at least ten minutes very gently, then strain. You can either go ahead and use the decoction, hot or cold, or store it in the refrigerator for up to three days.

When your decoction is ready there are two ways you can put it to use. You can drink it hot or cold. You can sweeten it too. Aim for one cup three times per day if needed. You can always just take sips if you have a bad stomachache or cramps, and you want to test the waters. The alternative is to apply cramp bark as compress to your belly, by soaking a clean cloth or flannel in the decoction and then applying it to the area that needs relaxing – you might want to warm that up a little first like with a microwave for 15 seconds.

Caution

Cramp bark is recognized as a safe herb, and has been around for centuries. You can do more reading on this herb, and experiment with tinctures, capsules and decoctions to find out what works best for you. It is sold commercially at every health food store. One main contraindications is for people who are sensitive to aspirin — you should avoid cramp bark because of its salicin content. If you take blood thinners (Coumadin, Plavix and others), then cramp bark is not recommended because it will enhance blood-thinning. Cramp bark contains components that could make you bleed more easily hence the warning. Additionally, if you have tinnitus (ear ringing), you might also wish to avoid cramp bark.