

Herbal treatments

Introduction

Herbal treatments have been suggested as possible adjunctive therapies for people with bipolar disorder who have inadequate response to their usual medications. Herbal treatments include traditional Chinese medicines, ginkgo biloba, folate and inositol.

Method

We have included only systematic reviews (systematic literature search, detailed methodology with inclusion/exclusion criteria) published in full text, in English, from the year 2010 that report results separately for people with a diagnosis of bipolar or related disorders. Reviews were identified by searching the databases MEDLINE, EMBASE and PsycINFO. Hand searching reference lists of identified reviews was also conducted. When multiple copies of review topics were found, the most recent and/or comprehensive review was included. Reviews with pooled data were given priority for inclusion.

Review reporting assessment was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist, which describes a preferred way to present a meta-analysis¹. Reviews reporting less than 50% of items have been excluded from the library. The PRISMA flow diagram is a suggested way of providing information about studies included and excluded with reasons for exclusion. Where no flow diagram has been presented by individual reviews, but identified studies have been described in the text, reviews have been checked for this item. Note that early reviews may have been guided by less stringent reporting checklists than the PRISMA, and that some reviews may have been limited by journal guidelines.

Evidence was graded using the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation ([GRADE](#)) Working Group approach where high quality evidence such as that gained from randomised controlled trials

(RCTs) may be downgraded to moderate or low if review and study quality is limited, if there is inconsistency in results, indirect comparisons, imprecise or sparse data and high probability of reporting bias. It may also be downgraded if risks associated with the intervention or other matter under review are high. Conversely, low quality evidence such as that gained from observational studies may be upgraded if effect sizes are large or if there is a dose dependent response. We have also taken into account sample size and whether results are consistent, precise and direct with low associated risks (see end of table for an explanation of these terms)². The resulting table represents an objective summary of the available evidence, although the conclusions are solely the opinion of staff of NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia).

Results

We found four systematic reviews that met inclusion criteria³⁻⁶.

- Moderate to low quality evidence finds adjunctive folate may be helpful for mania but not for depression.
- Moderate to low quality evidence finds a large improvement in depression symptoms with adjunctive coenzyme Q10.
- Moderate to low quality evidence finds potential benefit of adjunctive micronutrients (EMPowerplus) for clinical improvement.
- Moderate to low quality evidence finds no benefit of adjunctive inositol for depression.

Herbal treatments

Bahji A, Ermacora D, Stephenson C, Hawken ER, Vazquez G

Comparative Efficacy and Tolerability of Adjunctive Pharmacotherapies for Acute Bipolar Depression: A Systematic Review and Network Meta-analysis

Canadian Journal of Psychiatry 2021; 66: 274-88

[View review abstract online](#)

Comparison	Eight weeks of adjunctive coenzyme Q10 (200mg) vs. adjunctive placebo for depression in people with bipolar disorder.
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (small sample, imprecise, direct) finds a large improvement in depression symptoms with adjunctive coenzyme Q10.
Depression	
<i>A large effect of improved depression symptoms with coenzyme Q10; 1 study, N = 69, RR = 5.96, 95%CI 2.03 to 17.48, p < 0.05</i>	
Risks	Not reported
Consistency in results[†]	N/A; 1 study
Precision in results[§]	Imprecise
Directness of results	Direct

Mukai T, Kishi T, Matsuda Y, Iwata N

A meta-analysis of inositol for depression and anxiety disorders

Human Psychopharmacology 2014; 29: 55-63

[View review abstract online](#)

Comparison	Six weeks of adjunctive inositol vs. adjunctive placebo for depression in people with bipolar disorder.
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (consistent, direct, imprecise, small samples) suggests no benefit of adjunctive inositol for depression.

Herbal treatments

Depression and response	
<p><i>No significant differences between groups in response rates;</i> 2 RCTs, N = 42, RR = 0.63, 95%CI 0.35 to 1.12, $p = 0.12$, $I^2 = 22%$, $p = 0.26$</p> <p><i>No significant differences between groups in depression scores, measured on the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale;</i> 2 RCTs, N = 42, SMD = 0.11, 95%CI -0.52 to 0.75, $p = 0.72$, $I^2 = 0%$, $p = 0.62$</p>	
Risks	<i>No significant differences between groups in gastrointestinal upsets;</i> 1 RCT, N = 24, SMD = 3.00, 95%CI 0.36 to 24.92, $p = 0.31$
Consistency in results	Consistent where applicable (> 1 RCT).
Precision in results	Imprecise
Directness of results	Direct

Rucklidge JJ, Kaplan BJ

Broad-spectrum micronutrient formulas for the treatment of psychiatric symptoms: A systematic review

Expert Review of Neurotherapeutics 2013; 13: 49-73

[View review abstract online](#)

Comparison	Up to 21 months of EMPowerplus in adults or children with bipolar disorder (no control group).
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (appears consistent, unable to assess precision, direct, large samples) suggests potential benefit of adjunctive EMPowerplus for clinical improvement.
Clinical response	
4 open-label trials and 2 database analyses, total N = 543, found clinical improvement in most of the samples.	
Risks	Not reported.
Consistency in results	Unable to assess; no measure of consistency is reported, however results appear consistent.

Herbal treatments

Precision in results	Unable to assess; no measure of precision is reported.
Directness of results	Direct

Zheng W, Li W, Qi H, Xiao L, Sim K, Ungvari GS, Lu XB, Huang X, Ning YP, Xiang YT

Adjunctive folate for major mental disorders: A systematic review

Journal of Affective Disorders 2020; 267: 123-30

[View review abstract online](#)

Comparison	Adjunctive folate vs. placebo for people with bipolar disorder.
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (small samples, unable to assess consistency or precision, direct) finds adjunctive folate may be helpful for mania, but not for depression.
Depression and mania	
<p>1 study (N = 88) assessed 3 weeks of folate plus sodium valproate and found folate was more effective than placebo for an acute manic episode.</p> <p>1 study (N = 101) assessed 52 weeks of folate plus lamotrigine found no differences in depression when compared to placebo.</p>	
Risks	Authors report adjunctive folate is safe.
Consistency in results	Unable to assess; no measure of consistency is reported.
Precision in results	Unable to assess; no measure of precision is reported.
Directness of results	Direct

Explanation of acronyms

CI = Confidence Interval, I^2 = the percentage of the variability in effect estimates that is due to heterogeneity rather than sampling error (chance), N = number of participants, p = statistical probability of obtaining that result ($p < 0.05$ generally regarded as significant), RR = odds ratio, SMD = standardised mean difference, vs. = versus

Herbal treatments

Explanation of technical terms

* Bias has the potential to affect reviews of both RCT and observational studies. Forms of bias include; reporting bias – selective reporting of results; publication bias - trials that are not formally published tend to show less effect than published trials, further if there are statistically significant differences between groups in a trial, these trial results tend to get published before those of trials without significant differences; language bias – only including English language reports; funding bias - source of funding for the primary research with selective reporting of results within primary studies; outcome variable selection bias; database bias - including reports from some databases and not others; citation bias - preferential citation of authors. Trials can also be subject to bias when evaluators are not blind to treatment condition and selection bias of participants if trial samples are small⁷.

† Different effect measures are reported by different reviews.

Prevalence refers to how many existing cases there are at a particular point in time. Incidence refers to how many new cases there are per population in a specified time period. Incidence is usually reported as the number of new cases per 100,000 people per year. Alternatively some studies present the number of new cases that have accumulated over several years against a person-years denominator. This denominator is the sum of individual units of time that the persons in the population are at risk of becoming a case. It takes into account the size of the underlying population sample and its age structure over the duration of observation.

Reliability and validity refers to how accurate the instrument is. Sensitivity is the proportion

of actual positives that are correctly identified (100% sensitivity = correct identification of all actual positives) and specificity is the proportion of negatives that are correctly identified (100% specificity = not identifying anyone as positive if they are truly not).

Weighted mean difference scores refer to mean differences between treatment and comparison groups after treatment (or occasionally pre to post treatment) and in a randomised trial there is an assumption that both groups are comparable on this measure prior to treatment. Standardised mean differences are divided by the pooled standard deviation (or the standard deviation of one group when groups are homogenous) which allows results from different scales to be combined and compared. Each study's mean difference is then given a weighting depending on the size of the sample and the variability in the data. Less than 0.4 represents a small effect, around 0.5 a medium effect, and over 0.8 represents a large effect⁷.

Odds ratio (OR) or relative risk (RR) refers to the probability of a reduction (< 1) or an increase (> 1) in a particular outcome in a treatment group, or a group exposed to a risk factor, relative to the comparison group. For example, a RR of 0.75 translates to a reduction in risk of an outcome of 25% relative to those not receiving the treatment or not exposed to the risk factor. Conversely, a RR of 1.25 translates to an increased risk of 25% relative to those not receiving treatment or not having been exposed to a risk factor. A RR or OR of 1.00 means there is no difference between groups. A medium effect is considered if $RR > 2$ or < 0.5 and a large effect if $RR > 5$ or < 0.2 ⁸. InOR stands for logarithmic OR where a InOR of 0 shows no difference between groups. Hazard ratios measure the effect of an explanatory variable on the hazard or risk of an event.

Herbal treatments

Correlation coefficients (eg, r) indicate the strength of association or relationship between variables. They can provide an indirect indication of prediction, but do not confirm causality due to possible and often unforeseen confounding variables. An r of 0.10 represents a weak association, 0.25 a medium association and 0.40 and over represents a strong association. Unstandardised (b) regression coefficients indicate the average change in the dependent variable associated with a 1 unit change in the independent variable, statistically controlling for the other independent variables. Standardised regression coefficients represent the change being in units of standard deviations to allow comparison across different scales.

‡ Inconsistency refers to differing estimates of effect across studies (i.e. heterogeneity or variability in results) that is not explained by subgroup analyses and therefore reduces confidence in the effect estimate. I^2 is the percentage of the variability in effect estimates that is due to heterogeneity rather than sampling error (chance) - 0% to 40%: heterogeneity might not be important, 30% to 60%: may represent moderate heterogeneity, 50% to 90%: may represent considerable heterogeneity and over this is considerable heterogeneity. I^2 can be calculated from Q (chi-square) for the test of heterogeneity with the following formula⁷;

$$I^2 = \left(\frac{Q - df}{Q} \right) \times 100\%$$

§ Imprecision refers to wide confidence intervals indicating a lack of confidence in the effect estimate. Based on GRADE recommendations, a result for continuous data (standardised mean differences, not

weighted mean differences) is considered imprecise if the upper or lower confidence limit crosses an effect size of 0.5 in either direction, and for binary and correlation data, an effect size of 0.25. GRADE also recommends downgrading the evidence when sample size is smaller than 300 (for binary data) and 400 (for continuous data), although for some topics, these criteria should be relaxed⁹.

|| Indirectness of comparison occurs when a comparison of intervention A versus B is not available but A was compared with C and B was compared with C, which allows indirect comparisons of the magnitude of effect of A versus B. Indirectness of population, comparator and/or outcome can also occur when the available evidence regarding a particular population, intervention, comparator, or outcome is not available and is therefore inferred from available evidence. These inferred treatment effect sizes are of lower quality than those gained from head-to-head comparisons of A and B.

Herbal treatments

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