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Nature's Tonic for the Blood

By Dr. Michael Murray, N.D.

Most Americans know that sarsaparilla extracts are used as flavor components in root beer. What they don't know is sarsaparilla's medicinal history, which includes its use as a "tonic" and "blood purifier."

Tonics are defined as agents "which permanently exalt the energies of the body at large, without vitally affecting any one organ in particular ... In short, tonics tone the whole system."¹

A blood purifier or depurative refers to an agent which cleanses and purifies the system) Sarsaparilla's reputation in this regard probably stems from its importation from the Caribbean and South America to Europe in the 16th century for the treatment of syphilis.²

A French physician, Nicholas Monardes, published a comprehensive account of sar-saparilla and several other "new" drugs in the treatment of syphilis in 1574. Many Europeans at the time believed that syphilis had come to Europe from the West Indies with Columbus' sailors. Since it was believed that indigenous diseases might be cured by native medicinal herbs, it was natural for sarsaparilla to become a popular remedy. Stan-



dard treatment for syphilis at the time was mercury, which often resulted in higher morbidity than syphilis. Sarsaparilla was a welcome alternative. Despite initial excitement, Monardes' sarsaparilla cure sank in favor. This was probably due to other components in the cure. Patients were confined to a warm room for thirty days, and for the following forty days were to abstain from both wine and sexual intercourse.²

However, sarsaparilla continued to be used in the treatment of syphilis. During Portuguese military operations in 1812, a British Inspector General of Hospitals noted its positive effect. Portuguese syphilis cases treated with sarsaparilla recovered more quickly and completely than their British counterparts treated with mercury.²

Sarsaparilla was also used by the Chinese in the treatment of syphilis. Clinical observations in China demonstrated that sarsaparilla is effective in about 90% of cases of acute syphilis and 50% of cases with chronic syphilis, confirmed by blood

tests.³

Sarsaparilla was clearly more beneficial than mercury in the treatment of syphilis. Yet, mercury established itself as the standard treatment of syphilis for over four and a half centuries. It has been stated that "the use of mercury in the treatment of syphilis may have been the most colossal hoax ever perpetrated" in the history of medicine. Mercury represented a new kind of medicine; formulated and prepared in a laboratory and using the new techniques of chemistry. It helped prepare the way for future drugs at the expense of herbal medicines.²

An interesting note is that sarsaparilla species were used all over the globe, by many different cultures for the same conditions namely gout, arthritis, fevers, digestive disorders, skin disease, and cancer.⁴

The mechanism of action of sarsaparilla is largely unknown, although the plant does contain several saponins (plant steroids) and has been shown to be clinically effective in the treatment of psoriasis.^{4,5,6} This evidence points to a possible effect on binding of cholesterol and bacterial toxins in the intestines.

SARSAPARILLA

A BINDER OF ENDOTOXIN

Evidence seems to support sarsaparilla as an endotoxin binder. Endotoxins are cell wall constituents of bacteria that are absorbed in the gut and enter the general circulation. The liver plays a vital role in filtering compounds absorbed from the intestinal tract. If the amount of endotoxin absorbed is excessive or if the liver is not functioning adequately, the liver can be overwhelmed allowing endotoxins to circulate in the blood.⁷

If endotoxins are allowed to circulate, activation of the complement system occurs. This system plays a critical role in inflammation and cell damage. Activation of complement is responsible for much of the inflammation and cell damage that occurs in many diseases including: gout, arthritis, and psoriasis. Conditions that are historically treated by sarsaparilla.

Individuals with psoriasis have been shown to have high levels of circulating endotoxins. Binding endotoxin in the gut is associated with clinical improvement in these individuals. In a controlled study of 92 patients, an endotoxin binding saponin (sarsaponin from sarsaparilla) greatly improved the psoriasis in 62% of the patients and resulted in complete clearance in 18%.

In further support of sarsaparilla's effect as a binder of endotoxin is its historical use in the treatment of fever. Absorbed endotoxins produce fever.⁷ Sarsaparilla also exhibits antibiotic activity, but this is probably secondary to its endotoxin binding action.⁴

Summary

Sarsaparilla's medicinal action appears to be a result of binding bacterial endotoxins in the gut, increasing their absorption. This greatly reduces the stress on the liver and other organs, and is probably responsible for sarsaparilla's historical use as a "tonic" and "blood purifier." This ability to bind endotoxins is also the probable reason why sarsaparilla is effective in many cases of psoriasis, gout, and arthritis.



I would recommend the following formulation:

**Extr. Sarsaparillae, radix (4:1)
(Sarsaparilla root extract) 250 mg.**

Provides the standardized extract of 100% pure Sarsaparilla root equivalent to 1000 mg. of crude powdered root. One concentrated capsule contains the biological activity of two 500 mg. capsules. Sarsaparilla root is standardized for its strength and biological activity to produce the finest botanical extracts available.

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