

# **Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments**

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

## **Understanding Athlete's Flu:**

As an admirer of excellence in any field I am fascinated by the levels achieved by the modern athlete and so much enjoy watching them perform. I am disturbed however by the lack of understanding of the demands on their systems, which show up so often at crucial times as Athletes Flu.

A fundamental of the preparation of all athletes should be the enjoyment of total health and vitality and a bullet proof immune system. They should be feeling 110% jumping out of their skin fit, happy and healthy all the time and if they are not, then there is something less than perfect about their care and preparation.

This seems like a tall order but it really is not at all. All that is required is a detailed understanding of wellness, the holistic approach, rather than the striving for the absence of illness, the medical approach.

Wellness and the absence of illness are not the same thing, they are not even close.

An immune system functioning at about 60% will keep illness at bay.  
Wellness is all about 100% fit and well in body, mind and spirit.

## **Physical Wellness:**

Physical wellness is easy enough to define, to manage and to support using herbal supplements and medicines.

Physical wellness is a state where the cardiovascular system, the muscular structure, digestive system, and all the organs of metabolism are functioning at peak and in harmony. The adrenal reserves must be plentiful and readily accessible, and the immune system must be functioning at peak.

### **1. Cardiovascular Health:**

The cardiovascular system is well understood in sports medicine and training. It is the most mechanistic of the components of health and the most subject to measurement. Therefore, in this rational/scientific age where increasingly we try to quantify everything, this system has received more than its fair share of attention. I have no argument and nothing much to add except to caution that a focus on measurement and scientific evaluation leads to a tendency to discount or disregard all those factors not easily, or perhaps not ever, subject to measurement. It is only a short step to the ridiculous along this path, as a consideration of all the following aspects of physical wellness will show.

A Herbalist or other Natural Therapist can support any deficiencies or weaknesses in the cardiovascular in particular individuals on a case by case basis. These could include for example; inefficiencies in the Lungs or Bronchioles where herbs like Elecampane, Coltsfoot or Gelsemium may be valuable; weaknesses in the vein walls where Rue is very important; or in the heart itself where Hawthorn is valuable. Other

# Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

areas of bone marrow or spleen health or other blood quality factors that can impinge on cardiovascular efficiency are dealt with below.

## **2. Metabolic Harmony:**

Metabolic harmony is less well understood and much more difficult to assess and to measure than is cardiovascular efficiency.

Metabolic harmony is achieved when the Pituitary, Thyroid, Kidneys, Adrenals, Liver, Spleen, Pancreas, Heart, Lungs and Bone Marrow are all healthy. These combine to ensure that the Digestive, the Respiratory and the Circulatory systems are functioning at peak.

A diet with plentiful natural sources of Carbohydrates, Vitamins and Minerals and a minimum of adulterated or otherwise processed foods is important but on its own will not ensure the health and harmony of the component organs and systems.

There are a few criteria however that apply across the board to all individuals and to optimise digestive, metabolic and nervous system health in our athlete we must first understand their constitutional type.

## **Constitutional Types:**

Each athlete must be assessed within the context of his or her own individual constitutional and nervous system type and health history to provide individually crafted support. This is the task of the Naturopath who looks holistically at an individual and prescribes herbs, dietary supplements and nervous system tonics to suit the individual. To take a few examples:

### **The gut reactor:**

Is an individual who internalises all their stress and pressure and expresses it as a disruption in the digestive processes. This may show up as dyspepsia, ulcers, colic, nausea, bloating, and intolerance to fat, diarrhoea, irritable bowel, constipation or the inability to maintain body condition. A digestive system exposed to such patterns cannot function at peak, cannot absorb completely the nutrient content of their food and, if left untended, will in the end lead to more serious health problems. A herbal supplement program to deal with such a pattern may be as simple as a combination of herbs such as Chamomile, Alfalfa, Dandelion, Slippery Elm and Licorice.

### **The muscle tension reactor:**

Is an individual who reacts to stress and pressure by building up tension in muscle tissue within the body. This can show up as teeth grinding, elevated blood pressure, neck tension headaches, cramps and excess muscle bulk built up through the isometric effect of muscles pulling constantly against one another. The management of muscular mass, fitness, tone and vitality is critically important in all sports. A program to deal with a pattern of muscle tension reactivity can be as simple as the use of the herb Valerian, coupled with deep tissue massage and maybe meditation.

# Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

## The head reactor:

Will process all stress and pressure in the brain, which will work harder and harder going around, and around, unproductively. This will interfere with the quality of sleep and relaxation, cause anxiety even depression and deplete vitality, Vitamin B and adrenal reserves all to no purpose. A program suited to such an individual might include herbs such as Hops, PassionFlower and Vervain along with relaxation and perhaps yoga or meditation techniques and regular counselling.

Other types:

Other individuals react to stress and pressure by depleting adrenal reserves, compromising their immunity, restricting circulation to areas of their bodies or impeding respiratory efficiency.

All these tendencies must be assessed, understood and addressed long before they result in loss of performance and certainly, long before they result in serious and career threatening illness which they all have the potential to do if left untended.

Attempting to sustain health and athletic potential purely on the basis of inputs and outputs (food, training, supplements and vitamins for example) in some sort of 'scientific' manner is naive, ridiculous and haphazard in the extreme. Without an holistic understanding and support of each individuals history, reactions and response to pressure and stress underpinning everything else, no athlete can reach and sustain their potential.

## 3. Adrenal Reserves:

Adrenal reserves depend on the health of the Kidneys and Adrenal Glands and high levels of Vitamin C stored in the Adrenals. Adrenalin is depleted by apprehension, fear, shock, overtraining, caffeine and cola drinks. Confidence, challenge, success, kidney health, Iron and Vitamin C all sustain adrenalin. Management of adrenal reserves is critical to peak athletic performance.

Adrenalin is most valuable to the athlete when it is held in reserve and not when it is being utilised. It is only possible to sustain peak health and performance over the long term if it comes without depending on adrenalin. The adrenalin will then be able to kick in at those critical times when; the basketballer or pole vaulter needs to fly just that little bit higher; the swimmer or distance runner to pull ahead in the last lap; or the goal keeper to react just that little bit faster in the penalty shootout.

The habit of depending on adrenalin routinely for training and in competition will inevitably compromise potential and result in physical and emotional health problems cutting short a career. Herbs, which boost and protect adrenal reserves, are Borage, Rosehips and Liquorice which should be used regularly as part of the athletes supplement program.

## 4. Immune System Resilience:

This depends on the proper development of the immune system and the minimum of intervention in normal illnesses to allow the bodies own immunity to mature.

## **Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments**

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

Immunity depends on high blood iron and oxygen and plentiful Vitamin C and Antioxidant supplies.

The herb Rosehips provides all of the above requirements. Rosehips are an excellent source of organic iron compounds and it is higher in Vitamin C than almost any other natural substance. Rosehips is a better source also, because the Vitamin C is formed and stored by nature and partnered with Iron, Copper and a trace of Cobalt. This allows it to be absorbed and utilised much more effectively than can any manufactured Vitamin C supplement.

Rosehips therefore supply antioxidant activity to the athlete to assist in clearing the high levels of free radicals generated by 'excessive' physical exercise. Rosehips are also a major Kidney and Adrenal Tonic and not a bad Liver Tonic. Any athlete of any description needs to drink copious amounts of Rosehips tea as a regular part of every day's fluid intake.

Oxygenation of the blood, given healthy bone marrow and spleen function shouldn't be a problem as so much of athletic activity and training is aerobic. Comfrey besides being good for the bones is a principal spleen tonic also in conjunction with Rosehips. The herb Yarrow is another very high iron source and it also functions specifically on promoting bone marrow health.

The highest antioxidant herb is the bark of the Maritime Pine, which is about 25 times as powerful as vitamin C in this regard. This amazing herb also protects peripheral circulation and prevents burnout from overtraining as well as protecting the immunity at a very fundamental level to minimise the likelihood of severe immune system diseases like Cancer and Rheumatism for example.

The immune system works at a whole range of different levels and the nourishment of this critical system is very poorly understood by allopathic medicine.

### **5. Athletes Flu as a physical condition:**

In physical wellness terms therefore a flu which develops just prior to a major competition is a predictable event.

Athlete's flu can only occur if the immune system resilience has been depleted or improperly supported.

In sports medicine terms there is some acknowledgment that athletes flu has something to do with over-training or anxiety but mostly it is blamed on some errant virus which the athlete was unfortunate enough to catch. The best allopathic medicine can do is suggest that the athlete has more Vitamin C.

In holistic medical terms we must first understand and support the whole range of physical wellness factors above and then move on into another whole range of factors influencing mental wellness.

### **Mental Wellness:**

## **Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments**

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

Is a state where the individual is happy, positive and fulfilled. The mind is alert and calm at the same time and is able to sustain periods of intense focus without depletion. Mental wellness includes being in touch with ones feelings and instincts and feeling full of personal power and self-confidence.

The particulars of natural ability, mental toughness, motivation and all the other elements which contribute to the psyche of the world class athlete will be debated forever by sports psychologists and cultural anthropologists.

All of this discussion is outside the realm of the naturopathic Herbalist but the maintenance of mental acuity and the protection against stress related problems are very much within this realm.

### **Stress:**

Besides all the tools of the sports psychologist, mental wellness and resilience depends on the physical nourishment of the nervous system as alluded to earlier during the discussion on metabolism. The physical nervous system of every individual is structurally different and requires slightly different nutrients.

Throughout the ages different criteria were used to differentiate types including astrological signs as historically the most comprehensive and enduring. We have much more crudely classified mental and body types as Type A and Type B for example while at the same time pooh poohing some of the older systems.

It is important to evaluate every individual and attempt to come up with a blend of Nervines (herbal nervous system tonics) which suit that individual. These tonic substances may not be so critical in everyday life but the pressure of elite competition soon depletes the nervous system to an extent where special attention is necessary for maintenance. This maintenance can be as simple as a cup of Chamomile tea before meals or before bed or a couple of Valerian capsules before bed. It can be simple external treatments such as a cap full of Lavender Oil in a hot bath or a few drops of Sandalwood Oil rubbed into Cervical Spine 5 or any number of other oils or incense burnt or steamed in various ways. There are many other specific herbal Nervines each suited to a particular individuals style of reacting to stress loadings.

As a herbalist I also have access to a range of Homoeopathic remedies including the Bach Flower range where I can dissipate the effects of shock or balance out the effects of confidence, fear, apprehension, panic, distraction and all the rest.

Self prescription of many Nervines and all Homoeopathic remedies is to be avoided and is best left to the objective professional as it is nearly impossible to assess yourself or a person close to you. There are exceptions with the simpler of the Nervine herbs and with the use of Rescue Remedy for example to dissipate the negative effects of shock. Rescue Remedy should be carried by all parents, coaches and medics to be administered as the first step of first aid in all cases of shock large and small. For small shocks it facilitates the dissipation of the energy of shock, preventing depletion of adrenal reserves and improving recovery times. For large shocks it can save a life.

### **Let's expand the definition of Athletes Flu:**

## **Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments**

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

Glandular Fever, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Post Viral Syndrome are all conditions where the immunity has broken down due to stress and not to physical factors. Once again this is poorly understood outside of holistic medical circles mostly because you can't measure stress objectively. Our modern scientific approach makes it so much easier to discount it and concentrate on viral or genetic indicators as a way of explaining such illnesses.

The elite athlete just the same as a high school senior with Glandular Fever have both depleted their reserves to Vitamin B to the extent that there is a catastrophic collapse in this system. The symptoms of this collapse are various but often include swollen glands, aches and pains, extreme weariness and poor recovery in sleep, poor concentration and severe malaise generally. It is true that there can be found secondary viral infestation like the Epstein-Barr Virus for example, in the case of Glandular Fever, but this virus does not cause the symptoms and is not responsible for the depletion that resulted in the illness.

The B group Vitamins are those responsible for supporting our systems against emotional stress (as contrasted with Vitamin C which supports our systems against physical stress). When dietary intake is not high enough as is the case with many modern breakfast cereals and breads or dietary regimens without sufficient unprocessed carbohydrates, our Vitamin B reserves can be marginal.

### **Athletes Flu as a mental condition:**

The stress and pressure of competition at any elite level coupled with the demands which success breeds, can all accumulate to bring down an athlete at any stage of their career,

To regard athlete's flu or glandular fever as bad luck or some sort of genetic weakness or the fault of an errant virus is asinine.

A diet high in B group Vitamins and a metabolism, which is healthy and capable of absorbing such nutrients, is all that is required to protect the athlete (and the high school senior) from all such stress related illnesses and may easily save a career.

A full discussion of all the other mental wellness factors, which can affect peak athletic performance, is a very large subject that I will cover elsewhere.

### **The assessment of Mental Wellness:**

The objective self-assessment of ones personality type and ones reactions to stress and emotional demands is by definition impossible. Objective assessment in these areas is also difficult when one is a parent, close friend or coach. Mental wellness in your elite athlete is best assessed and periodically monitored by an uninvolved professional.

I am suggesting that there is a place for the holistic medical professional in this process to broaden the range of understanding and treatment tools and supplements available to assist the elite athlete.

Besides nutrition, herbal supplements and vitamin therapy your athlete may end up

## **Robert McDowell's Herbal Treatments**

---

[www.herbal-treatments.com](http://www.herbal-treatments.com)

---

with recommendations ranging from yoga, martial arts or ti-chi through music or dance to meditation.

### **In Conclusion:**

I have endeavoured to broaden the discussion of athlete's flu to include a full consideration of the physical, mental and emotional factors that I take into consideration when treating an athlete who has collapsed at or near the peak of their training.

As you can see, the range of Flu symptoms and those of Glandular Fever can both be involved and must be considered as being related in all cases. Further, both conditions are normally blamed, at least superficially, on viral attack. The fact is that no virus can bring down for long an individual with a vital immune system or a vital emotional system.

Again, superficially, Flu and Glandular Fever can be prevented with Vitamin C and Vitamin B. The fact is that considering these illnesses just in terms of nutritional shortcomings without understanding and treating the whole situation is ridiculous.

Robert McDowell  
Herbalist  
June 2001