

About Usnea

Commonly called old man's beard, a name derived from its appearance, usnea is a lichen that grows on living and dead trees throughout the world. It is quite common in North America, and this wide availability and its strong antibacterial properties make it a significant herb in treating resistant bacteria.

Usnea ranges in size from a small tuft to large hanging strands resembling hair. It may be gray-green in the smaller species and mild yellow-green in the larger hanging strands. The herb is a symbiote composed of two plants intertwined. The inner plant is a thin white thread, which when wet stretches like a rubber band. The outer plant gives the herb its color and grows around the inner rubber-band-like plant. The distinctive method of identifying usnea is wetting it and stretching it to see whether it is springy and, when it snaps apart, looking for the distinctive white thread of the inner plant. This inner band is strongly immune stimulating, and the outer plant sheath possesses strong antibiotic properties.

While generally inactive against gram-negative bacteria, usnea has strong antibiotic activity against gram-positive bacteria. At dilutions of 1:20,000 to 1:50,000, usnea was found to completely inhibit the growth of tuberculosis, and in dilutions of 1:20,000, it completely inhibited the growth of *Staphylococcus*, *Streptococcus*, and *Pneumococcus* organisms. In fact, it has shown activity more effective against some bacterial strains than penicillin. In studies carried out in the early part of this century, over 52 different species of lichen besides usnea were shown to inhibit bacterial growth. Compounds in the lichens that inhibit bacteria are usnic acid, protolichesterinic acid, some orcinol derivatives, and several (as usual) unidentified substances. Of those, the strongest is usnic acid, present in all usnea species.

Usnea has been traditionally used throughout the world for skin infections, abscesses, upper respiratory and lung infections, vaginal infections, and fungal infections. The lichen, soaked in garlic juice or a strong garlic decoction, was one traditional method of treating large gaping wounds in the body.

Preparation and Dosage

May be used externally as a tincture, wash, or powder. May be used internally as a tea, tincture, spray, or douche.