

Okra: a salve for GI disorders?

A common garden vegetable yields mucilage helpful in dysentery, as Raman Das Mahatyagi recalls.

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Disorders of the gastrointestinal tract (GIT) such as constipation, diarrhoea, IBS and Crohn's disease are very commonplace nowadays and can cause much discomfort in some people. These disorders can be caused by any number of factors, including microbes, inflammation and allergies. I have found that the properties of the vegetable okra are highly beneficial in the treatment of such cases because they have a demulcent and anti-inflammatory affect on the intestinal wall while also showing a possible anti-microbial influence.

When I was eight years old, I spent a lot of time with my grandfather, who had an interest in traditional Indian (Ayurvedic) medicine. I learnt many things about Ayurveda from my grandfather, one of which was that okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) was effective in the treatment of dysentery.

A case of diarrhoea

One day, returning home from school, I noticed one of my neighbours coming out of the toilet. I had seen him going there a few times earlier that morning and asked him if there was something wrong. He replied that he had had diarrhoea for the past week. I asked him if he also had blood and mucus in his stool, and he confirmed that he did. This man knew that I spent a lot of time with my grandfather so

asked if I had any herbs that would help him. I remembered what my grandfather had told me about okra and told the man to come with me to my family's garden.

I picked four baby okra and told him to eat them all and come back and see me the next day. When he returned, he said he was feeling much better so I gave him 12 okra to take in divided doses three times a day before food, and told him to come back again the next day. This continued for a few days until the man was completely better.

A few months later my uncle started suffering with dysentery, complaining of blood and mucus in his stool and terrible cramps in his intestines. He had a conversation with the man I had treated previously and then came to me, asking for help. I agreed but then we both realised that okra was now out of season. I thought about this problem and the properties of the okra that were beneficial in cases of dysentery, and realised that *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, which was now in flower, also possessed these qualities.

Hibiscus to the rescue

I picked four buds from the hibiscus bush, removed the calyx and told my uncle to eat them and come back tomorrow. When he returned, he said that he did feel slightly better but that the flower buds tasted so bad that he didn't think he'd be able to eat any more. I suggested that he eat

a sweet with the buds to mask the taste. He continued to eat the buds with the candy over a period of a few days and, with the combination of the mucilaginous quality of the hibiscus and the sweetness of the candy, he was completely cured of dysentery.

A book review reveals

Until now I have never really questioned as to why the okra and hibiscus work so efficiently in cases of dysentery. Then just recently I was reading a review of *The Encyclopaedia of Clinical Nutrition: The Digestive and Renal Systems* [see *JCM* 2006;5(2):92]: 'The book contains some interesting comments on gastro-oesophageal reflux, for which we now have very effective treatments. The authors also state that okra in the diet can prevent *Helicobacter pylori* binding to the stomach wall'. I then realised that if okra can be beneficial in this case, it must work for the whole GIT and, in turn, help in the treatment of dysentery.

I find it interesting to think that the authors of this book have the medical knowledge and understanding of something that an eight-year-old boy in India had used as a form of treatment. I am now thinking that if it has been proven that okra can help with *H. pylori*, and I have practical experience of okra's and hibiscus' benefits in treating dysentery, maybe both of these plants can be highly beneficial in the treatment of other GIT disorders. I would like to see further research carried out in this area to see if this is the case and also to establish what are the active chemical constituents in okra and the hibiscus bud. ▀