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# Colchicum, a study

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## PHARMACOGNOSY

The origin of this remedy is that delicately beautiful plant, *Colchicum autumnale*, the autumn crocus or naked maiden. The pale mauve blossom, so suggestive of a crocus, possesses a pearly white tubular quill-like stem some five to ten inches high, its base encircled by two or three membranous sheaths. The three dark green strap-like leaves may be a foot or more in length and two inches wide. The flower springs from an underground corm resembling a bulb at first sight.

The corm is, however, solid inside its two coats, not laminated. It is a node on the underground rhizome, which forms fresh nodes every year. The outer coat is dark brown in colour, the inner one reddish-yellow. The solid corm, about the size of a small walnut, is white and fleshy and contains a milky juice. It is rounded on one aspect, flattened and grooved on the other.

The fruit is a large, three-valved capsule or syncarpy, containing dark brown seeds which are liberated when ripe by the bursting open of the capsule.

Such the description of the plant and its parts up to a point, but in its behaviour this plant is unique. It is indeed a member of the Liliaceæ but no other lily behaves in such an unorthodox and almost outrageous manner. The lilies are among the earliest plants to flower in the spring and are not "naked like their strange sister, but clothed in leaves, joyful and gay".

This plant, however, rushes into flower, or at any rate the flower suddenly comes to view above ground in the autumn, when other plants are dying; after hiding away from the sun during the normal flowering season it flaunts its lovely nakedness in the warm days of the Indian summer, devoid of leafy clothing. The leaves, forsooth, do not appear above ground till the following March or April when they companion the fruit, not the flower.

The seeds, moreover, are not liberated till July, having taken an inordinately long time to ripen, fertilization having taken place in the preceding autumn. All this presents a picture of strangely distorted growth rhythm and significantly, while this is taking place, a most virulent poison is being manufactured in the plant, namely an alkaloid, colchicine.

The plant therefore harbours pent-up poison. As one author writes, "In some parts of Europe the flowers grow in such profusion that a whole meadow is filled with them. This glorious sight gives no hint of the destructive force latent in the sea of plants and blossoms. The colourful, upright flowers look attractive and harmless, and children are in the habit of playing with the cheerfully rattling seed pods during the hay harvest. Now and again it happens that a child takes out one of the seeds and swallows it, or even eats a flower."

This may have fatal results. Five grammes of the seed are fatal to adults and one and a half grammes can kill a child. Murders have been committed or attempted by adding powdered *Colchicum* seeds to some strong alcoholic drink.

The plant was held in great renown in the thirteenth century, and from its supposed virtues in the cure of gout and rheumatism of the joints, it obtained the sobriquet of *Anima articularum*, "the soul of joints".

The long association of the plant with gout is indeed significant, for this malady is in itself an example of distorted metabolic rhythm, an imbalance of assimilation and elimination leading to the retention in the tissues of toxic waste products, another case of "pent-up poison".

This seemingly innocent-looking plant has a somewhat nauseous odour and is acrid to the taste. All its parts are poisonous even when dried. Many fatal cases of poisoning have been recorded; it was used by the ancients for both public and secret death sentences. For medicinal purposes the corm is used and is best lifted in the spring, when a year old. The mother tincture is prepared from the juice expressed from the corm.

#### PHARMACOLOGY

Colchicine is a mitotic poison interfering with the formation of the chromosome spindle in the process of cell division. It is in this way cytostatic. It also disturbs the rhythm of granulocyte formation in the bone marrow, producing either leucopenia or leucocytosis. Further it possesses an anti-allergic and anti-phlogistic action, thus interfering in a deadly manner with the body's natural defences, normally manifested by inflammation. It is, moreover, a capillary poison, causing marked distension, even paralysis, of the capillaries with resulting hyperæmia and hæmorrhage.

Symptoms of poisoning are instructive. One observer recorded that "on cutting the fresh corm into slices, the acrid particles emitted from it irritated the nostrils, fauces, and breath, and that the tips of the fingers with which it had been held became quite benumbed; that, applied for two minutes to the tip of the tongue, it rendered the part stiff and almost void of sensation for six hours: that less than a grain wrapped in a crumb of bread, and taken internally, produced alarming symptoms".

The symptoms of acute poisoning usually appear in a few hours after ingestion, but may be delayed as long as five days. A latent period is followed by a sudden and devastating "flare-up"; the mouth and throat begin to burn; the victim suffers unendurable thirst but has difficulty in swallowing. There is terrible nausea, followed by frequent and violent vomiting.

This condition lasts between twelve and twenty-four hours. Then more serious symptoms ensue, the sufferer exhibiting the typical picture of cholera with agonizing colic which grows more and more intense and is accompanied by bloody diarrhœic stools. Paralysis develops and difficulty in breathing. Death occurs in about two days unless a circulatory collapse brings an earlier release from the agony. The mind remains clear till the end.

Cushny mentions also, in poisoning by Colchicum, "depression, apathy, and collapse with a small rapid pulse. An early leucopenia is followed by leucocytosis."

In the use of material doses of colchicine in the treatment of gout it is noted that the treatment "is not effective unless early symptoms of Colchicum poisoning are produced".

The main affinities of the plant, therefore, are seen to be: with the gastrointestinal tract, causing severe nausea, vomiting and diarrhœa accompanied by belly cramps and collapse; with the kidneys, inducing nephritis and hæmaturia; with the muscular system, resulting in extreme loss of tone and consequent weakness; with serous membranes and fibrous tissues, producing irritation and rheumatic or gouty pains; also effusions may occur into pleural, pericardial, peritoneal or articular cavities, possibly hæmorrhagic in character; with mucous

membranes and skin, inducing redness, pricking sensations, and in the mouth and throat much burning.

#### PHYSIOGNOMY

The sufferer presents a waxy pallor of countenance. He appears exhausted and trembling; sits or lies very still, afraid to make the least movement—reminiscent of the *Bryonia* picture.

He may slide down in the bed from sheer weakness; may present dropsical swellings with pitting œdema or red, tender swollen joints.

#### PSYCHOLOGY

The *Colchicum* patient is oversensitive to everything, to light, noise, any little jar or jolt and especially to odours.

Perhaps because of this hypersensitive condition the sufferer is also exceedingly irritable—the least thing annoys—nothing is right—“there’s no pleasing him . . .”.

Again the picture may be one of absent-mindedness, forgetfulness and confusion of thought, especially in low fevers.

#### PHYSIOLOGY

The *Colchicum* subject, like the “naked maiden” shivering in the chill mists of autumn as they dissipate the warmth of the Indian summer, is extremely chilly, feeling cold even when close to the fire. There may, however, be occasional flushes of heat.

The reactions to food are peculiar, normal appetite being deranged. An extraordinary aversion from all kinds of food is associated with intense nausea. This latter is excited by the sight, smell, even mention or thought of food; the smell of food or of food cooking is sufficient to induce gagging, retching, vomiting and perhaps fainting. As a result the very idea of food becomes repugnant and all food may be refused.

Thirst varies considerably. It may be excessive or entirely absent.

Insomnia is common and loss of sleep tends to produce an extreme degree of exhaustion and debility.

Sweating is extremely prominent and at times of the cold clammy variety. If the perspiration is suppressed, perhaps by being in a cold draught, semi-paresis of the limbs may supervene.

As to *Modalities*, aggravation results from exposure to cold and damp, especially cold rains in autumn. Extreme heat in mid-summer is also not well borne. There is aggravation also from the least movement or even from being touched, owing to hypersensitivity.

Warmth, being well wrapped-up and rest afford relief. The delicate flower of the autumn crocus unfolds on still sunny days in the warmth of the Indian summer.

#### PATHOLOGY

*Colchicum* illnesses are acute and grave, but they are in essence an exacerbation of a smouldering internal disorder, underground as it were, which flares up into sudden obvious activity, possibly accompanied by effusion or by deposition of waste products in the tissues.

Pains are quite intolerable owing to the acuteness of all sensations. The hypersensitivity is, moreover, associated with a grave lack of reactivity leading to low states, as met with in typhoid or other fevers.

Extreme exhaustion is a prominent feature, the patient being too weak even to raise head from pillow—the withered blossom can no longer cope with its altered surroundings and withdraws into relative inertia below ground . . .

Hydrops of serous cavities or anasarca, local or general, may develop.

*Head.* Headaches are “rheumatic” in type, often spreading to the nape of the neck, aggravated by stooping and in the afternoon and evening, also by any mental exertion. They are associated with sensitiveness of the scalp; in fact the the whole skull feels sore and bruised.

*Eyes.* With headache the pupils tend to be unequal and vision dimmed. There is a liability to iritis in association with rheumatic symptoms. Styes or ulcers may be present on the lids. Lachrymation is common and the tears excoriate the skin.

*Respiratory System.* The sense of smell is abnormally acute, even to the detection of odours unperceived by others. Smells are apt to cause revulsion, even nausea and fainting.

Tingling and tickling sensations may be complained of in nose and throat and trachea, which latter may give rise to a tiresome dry cough.

*Alimentary System.* Teeth are very sensitive; hurt when clenching the jaws. Gums recede and teeth become loose.

A prominent feature as already mentioned is a deadly nausea associated with violent bilious vomiting and leading to extreme prostration. The nausea and vomiting are made much worse by any attempt to sit up, a symptom reminiscent of *Bryonia*.

Burning may cause distress in the pit of the stomach, but sometimes an icy cold feeling is present in this region.

The belly becomes extremely distended and tympanitic, with much flatulence and soreness to touch. Spasmodic pains occur, colicky, burning, griping pains, causing the sufferer to bend double in search of relief. Any movement or taking food increases the suffering.

Diarrhœa, or actual dysentery, may occur, especially in the autumn; the stools are extremely painful, frequent and may be passed involuntarily. They are jelly-like or putrid, dark, blood-stained and contain mucous shreds. Rectal prolapse may occur in association with much tenesmus and anal spasm.

The remedy may be called for in the “typhoid state”—dilated pupils, cold sweat on brow, head falls back weakly on pillow if attempts to raise it, lower jaw sagging widely, face cadaveric, tongue protruded with hesitant difficulty, aphonia, cold breath, restlessness, cramps in legs, nausea, vomiting and retching. But in spite of this conglomeration of severe symptoms the patient shows but little concern over his condition and none of the fear of death so prominent in the *Arsenicum album* sufferer.

*Cardio-vascular System.* Palpitation occurs with a sensation of oppression behind the sternum, especially at night and when lying on the left side. Anginal pains may be present, dyspncea on slight exertion and “cardiac anxiety”.

The pains in the region of the heart may be violent, cutting or stinging in type, and palpitation may be so severe that the heart's impulse can be heard at a distance. The chest feels as if "tightly bandaged".

In low fevers the heart action becomes weak with a thready pulse, low blood-pressure and threatened collapse.

In rheumatic illness subacute or chronic pericarditis may develop with or without effusion.

*Nervous System.* Paræsthesia—pins and needles—occurs in wrists, hands, fingers, and under the nails, and this is especially noticed when grasping something.

Neuralgic pains are described affecting usually one side of the face with a tendency to spread to the head and the ears.

*Urinary System.* Quite severe symptoms are recorded arising from inflammatory lesions of the urinary tract. Painful scalding urination, oliguria, anuria, albuminuria, hæmaturia, nephritis, anasarca with pitting œdema.

*Locomotor System.* The remedy may be of service in connection with rheumatic affections of the fibro-muscular tissues and also in arthritic lesions. The pains of a shooting, tearing type are more superficially felt when the weather is warm, but in cold weather they affect the deep tissues and the bones. Moreover, these pains may start on the left side and later extend to the right, as is the case with *Lachesis* symptoms.

Pains in the muscles are accompanied by bruised sensation and often by twitchings. They may especially affect the nape and the muscles of the chest. Pains in the arms may so paralyse the limb that it becomes impossible to grasp quite small objects.

Redness, heat, swelling, with sharp sticking pains affect the small joints of hands and feet, especially the big toes. These pains are apt to shift from joint to joint, to be worse from both cold and warmth, especially damp cold. They are aggravated by the least touch or jar which induces a fear of being approached, similar to that associated with *Arnica*. The least movement augments the pain and the sufferer is apt to become intensely irritable.

#### POSODOGY

*Colchicum* has been often employed in low potency, mother tincture or 3x, especially in the treatment of gout, but higher potencies are also efficacious.

It is essentially called for in acute and severe conditions as instanced above, and especially when the sufferer is extremely weak, extremely chilly, extremely sensitive and extremely irritable.

Related remedies are *Arsenicum album*, *Cantharis*, *Colocynthis*, *Veratrum album*, *Cactus grandifloris* and *Bryonia*.

After abuse of *Colchicum*, *Spigelia* can be used as an antidote.

# Colocynthis, a study

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## PHARMACOGNOSY

The source of this remedy is a gourd, *Cucumis colocynthis*, also known as bitter cucumber or bitter apple. The fruit, however, is much more like an orange in colour and size.

The plant is a member of the Cucurbitaceæ family, to which *Bryonia dioica* also belongs. It is a trailing plant, not seeking firm attachment like Bryony, but twisting and twining in a much more active and restless manner.

The white annual branched root strikes deep into the ground. The angular hispid stem bears long stalked palmate leaves, also hairy, of a fine green on the upper aspect and rough and pale below. A filiform tendril arises opposite each leaf stalk. The five-petalled star-shaped flower arises from the axilla of the leaf and has a short stalk; its colour is yellow with greenish veins. The pollen-bearing organs and the seed vessels are on separate flowers.

The fruit is a greenish yellow globose berry, almost obscenely large in relation to the quite small flower from which it arises. It has a thin but solid rind and contains a white spongy pulp in which are embedded yellowish-orange coloured oval smooth seeds. The fruit varies in size from 2 to 4 inches in diameter. It has an intensely bitter taste, which is retained in the mother tincture when prepared from the pulp.

It is noteworthy that this plant develops in the bloated pulp-filled belly of the fruit a most powerful purgative. Its cathartic action is mainly due to a glucoside, colocynthin, which possesses toxic properties. Resins and an alkaloid are also present and possess purgative powers.

The twisting and twining habits of growth are exemplified in the sufferer from poisoning with the pulp of the berry, who will be found writhing in agony and doubled up with excruciating colic. The bristly stem and prickly leaves, not to mention the separation of the sexes on different flowers, suggest an irascible, irritable, unsociable nature.

## PHARMACOLOGY

In moderate doses the drug acts as a purge and was employed extensively by both Arabian and Greek physicians for this purpose in dropsy, lethargy and in mania. It was also used to induce abortion. Its chief habitat is in the countries bordering the Eastern Mediterranean.

In large doses it causes violent inflammatory lesions of the intestinal tract leading to gangrene and death, the liver and genito-urinary organs being also involved.

The acute irritant effect on the gastro-intestinal canal results in nausea, vomiting, violent purging and severe griping pains. An affinity with the nervous system is manifested in paroxysmal neuralgia in various sites. Renal inflammation has occurred as the result of inhalation of the powdered pulp during its manufacture.

## PHYSIOGNOMY

The *Colocynthis* patient presents a mixed picture of anger and anguish. The face tends to be dark red and distorted with pain.

The sufferer will be writhing about in agony or doubled up with pain, possibly pressing some hard object into the belly in search of relief. He is quite unable to keep still.

He may be speechless with rage or, possibly, screaming with agony. The child lies on its belly or in a doubled-up posture.

## PSYCHOLOGY

Extreme irritability is the predominant feature in this sphere. A tendency to flare up over the least thing, to be easily upset by trifles. Friends irritate; he wants to be left alone; is disinclined to talk. The child is inclined to be naughty and to take offence very readily.

It should be noted here that complaints induced or precipitated by grief, anger, indignation or chagrin may well respond to this remedy. The sequence of events may start from emotional disturbance of endocrine activity, leading to autonomic imbalance, altered tone in plain muscle of gut and also of blood-vessel walls, and ensuing disorders of rhythm and function.

## PHYSIOLOGY

The *Colocynthis* subject is on the chilly side and is sensitive to cold, especially damp cold.

There may be a disinclination for food, but not nearly to the extreme degree manifested by *Colchicum* patients.

There is a constant desire to drink fluids, which taste good at the moment but leave a flat taste behind in the mouth.

The skin is often hot and dry. Sweat, if present, may smell like urine.

Sleep is apt to be disturbed by vivid dreams or may be difficult. When asleep there is a tendency to lie on the back with one hand beneath the head.

*Modalities.* Aggravation is caused by cold wind, damp cold, eating raw fruit, drinking iced water when hot; also by rage or indignation; by suppressed sweat; by repose; around the hour of 4 p.m.

Relief is felt to some extent by bending double, by hard pressure, and from locally applied heat.

## PATHOLOGY

*General.* All pains are paroxysmal, coming on in waves of agony. Both onset and relief are abrupt, a characteristic also of the pains of *Belladonna*, *Kali bichromicum* and *Kalmia*. The pains, moreover, are often accompanied by faintness and weakness; actual syncope may occur or the sufferer be too weak to speak.

The tearing, violent neuralgic pains are so severe that the victim must keep moving. While movement may not give much relief the pains are, nevertheless, much worse if he keeps at rest. Firm pressure affords some easement and local heat may help.

The typical pains may be brought on by a fit of anger or as the result of a quarrel or grave annoyance. Getting mad induces the pain, and the severity of the pains makes him madder still—so much so that he gets angry with sympathizers and desires to be left alone.

The pains are often left-sided.

*Head.* Giddiness is noticed when turning the head sharply, especially on turning it to the left.

The remedy has an important sphere in facial neuralgias affecting various regions, supra-orbital, infra-orbital and mandibular, and usually one-sided. The pain comes on in waves and may be relieved somewhat by pressure and heat. *Magnesia phosphorica* is another remedy of service in facial pain, especially when on the right side.

*Eyes.* Sharp boring pains are recorded, with relief from pressure. A sensation on stooping as if the eye would fall out. Quivering of the right upper lid.

*Ears.* Itching deep in the ear is relieved by boring the finger into the external auditory canal. Sounds tend to re-echo in the ears.

*Respiratory System.* Fluent coryza occurs in the morning without sneezing.

A dry teasing cough is accompanied by oppressive tightness in the chest. Stitches may be felt in the muscles of the thorax, between the shoulder-blades, or in one or other scapular region.

"Smoking tobacco immediately excites a persistent cough."

*Alimentary System.* It is in this sphere that the remedy really comes into its own. The taste in the mouth is often very bitter. There is a sore, very red tongue and the tongue feels "burnt" or "scalded". It may, however, be heavily coated white.

Teeth are sore, as if the nerve of the tooth had been put on the stretch, especially the teeth of the lower jaw.

An extreme degree of flatulent distension in the belly is associated with violent, paroxysmal, cutting, griping colic—as if "guts being ground between stones", as if "stomach was grasped by the fingers of a powerful hand . . .".

The pains are made worse by eating or drinking, even the smallest amounts. They are often accompanied by nausea and vomiting, diarrhoea and the passage of vast quantities of flatus. Kent points out, "The vomiting of *Colocynthis* is different from that of most other remedies. Nausea does not appear at first, but when the pain becomes sufficiently intense, nausea and vomiting begin, the contents of the stomach are ejected, and the patient continues to retch until the severity of the suffering decreases. The colic of infants is relieved by lying on the stomach, but as soon as the position is changed they begin to scream again."

Although the pain is relieved or eased at first by firm pressure, later on the belly becomes so sensitive that even touch is not tolerated. Temporary relief is afforded by local heat, by violent movement, by passage of flatus or a stool, by drinking coffee, by having a smoke.

Rectal urging is common, and stools tend to be copious, fluid, spluttery, frothy and saffron yellow in colour, and have a musty or mouldy odour. The stools may be dysenteric in character, with severe tenesmus, or jelly-like. Taking even the least amount of food or drink precipitates a further bowel action.

*Genital System.* Drawing pains may be felt in testicles and spermatic cords. Priapism may be troublesome.

Severe, tense, penetrating pain may be felt in the left ovary, doubling the sufferer up and accompanied by intense agitation.

*Urinary System.* Renal colic is associated with copious reddish brown urine showing a flocculent sediment.

A frequent, often ineffectual urge to urinate is accompanied by scalding micturition and associated with pressure in the hypogastrium and colicky pains in the belly.

Urine may be scanty, quickly becoming thick, gelatinous and sticky when passed, and having an intensely offensive odour.

*Nervous System.* Frightful pains, neuralgic in type, occur in spine, limbs, head, ovaries. They are often brought on by anger or rage, are shooting or lancinating in character and may be associated with numbness.

Trigeminal neuralgia may occur in association with gastro-enteritis.

Sciatica is a special indication if the symptoms agree. It is usually left-sided with cramp-like pains, worse at rest. The pain extends from the loin downwards into the thigh and may be accompanied by a sensation as if "the hip is fixed in iron clamps". The pain is aggravated by extending the limb and at night. It is eased to some extent by lying on the affected side, by drawing the limb up or by moving about.

*Locomotor System.* Pains and stiffness afflict the muscles, especially in the nape and cervical region, the upper dorsum, the right shoulder region and the palms.

The pains are vice-like, made worse by movement, and possibly accompanied by formication and numbness. They are eased by warmth and also by the passage of flatus. These tearing stitches in muscles are possibly due to local spasm or perhaps to local vaso-spasm.

A symptom mentioned is a cramping pain in the right thigh when walking, as if the psoas muscle were too short. On standing still the pain ceased, only to return on a further attempt to walk. Such sudden unaccountable spasms do occur at odd times and in odd sites; it might be that *Colocynthis* would give relief.

*Skin.* There is mention of pruritus affecting the whole surface of the body, accompanied by great restlessness. This is especially noticed in the evening and in bed, when it may be followed by sweating.

Widespread desquamation may occur.

#### POSOLOGY

The 200c and higher potencies are often extremely effective. Hahnemann states that, "The action of *Colocynthis* is of long duration."

Lower potencies are frequently employed on the continent, namely 2x to 4x.

A complementary remedy is *Cauticum*. *Opium* is listed as an antidote.









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