

Extraction techniques of Medicinal plants

Extraction, as the term is used pharmaceutically, involves the separation of medicinally active portions of plant or animal tissues from the inactive or inert components by using selective solvents in standard extraction procedures. The products so obtained from plants are relatively impure liquids, semisolids or powders intended only for oral or external use.

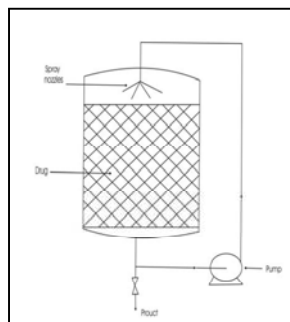
These include classes of preparations known as decoctions, infusions, fluid extracts, tinctures, pilular (semisolid) extracts and powdered extracts. Such preparations popularly have been called galenicals, named after Galen, the second century Greek physician. The purposes of standardized extraction procedures for crude drugs are to attain the therapeutically desired portion and to eliminate the inert material by treatment with a selective solvent known as *menstruum*.

The extract thus obtained may be ready for use as a medicinal agent in the form of tinctures and fluid extracts, it may be further processed to be incorporated in any dosage form such as tablets or capsules, or it may be fractionated to isolate individual chemical entities such as ajmalicine, hyoscine and vincristine, which are modern drugs. Thus, standardization of extraction procedures contributes significantly to the final quality of the herbal drug.

Methods of Extraction of Medicinal Plants

Maceration

In this process, the whole or coarsely powdered crude drug is placed in a stoppered container with the solvent and allowed to stand at room temperature for a period of at least 3 days with frequent agitation until the soluble matter has dissolved. The mixture then is strained, the marc (the damp solid material) is pressed, and the combined liquids are clarified by filtration or decantation after standing.



Circulatory extraction

Infusion

Fresh infusions are prepared by macerating the crude drug for a short period of time with cold or boiling water. These are dilute solutions of the readily soluble constituents of crude drugs.

Digestion

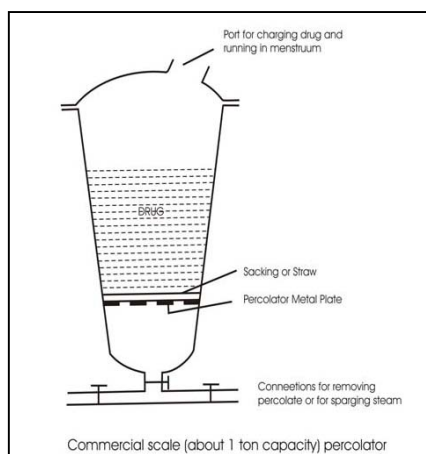
This is a form of maceration in which gentle heat is used during the process of extraction. It is used when moderately elevated temperature is not objectionable. The solvent efficiency of the menstruum is thereby increased.

Decoction

In this process, the crude drug is boiled in a specified volume of water for a defined time; it is then cooled and strained or filtered. This procedure is suitable for extracting water-soluble, heat-stable constituents. This process is typically used in preparation of Ayurvedic extracts called “quath” or “kawath”. The starting ratio of crude drug to water is fixed, e.g. 1:4 or 1:16; the volume is then brought down to one-fourth its original volume by boiling during the extraction procedure. Then, the concentrated extract is filtered and used as such or processed further.

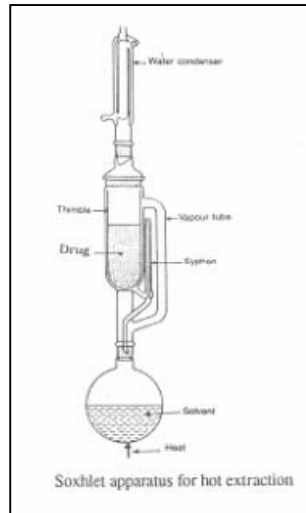
Percolation

This is the procedure used most frequently to extract active ingredients in the preparation of tinctures and fluid extracts. A percolator (a narrow, cone-shaped vessel open at both ends) is generally used. The solid ingredients are moistened with an appropriate amount of the specified menstruum and allowed to stand for approximately 4 h in a well closed container, after which the mass is packed and the top of the percolator is closed. Additional menstruum is added to form a shallow layer above the mass, and the mixture is allowed to macerate in the closed percolator for 24 h. The outlet of the percolator then is opened and the liquid contained therein is allowed to drip slowly. Additional menstruum is added as required, until the percolate measures about three-quarters of the required volume of the finished product. The marc is then pressed and the expressed liquid is added to the percolate. Sufficient menstruum is added to produce the required volume, and the mixed liquid is clarified by filtration or by standing followed by decanting.



Hot Continuous Extraction (Soxhlet)

In this method, the finely ground crude drug is placed in a porous bag or “thimble” made of strong filter paper, which is placed in chamber E of the Soxhlet apparatus (Figure 2). The extracting solvent in flask A is heated, and its vapors condense in condenser D. The condensed extractant drips into the thimble containing the crude drug, and extracts it by contact. When the level of liquid in chamber E rises to the top of siphon tube C, the liquid contents of chamber E siphon into flask A. This process is continuous and is carried out until a drop of solvent from the siphon tube does not leave residue when evaporated. The advantage of this method, compared to previously described methods, is that large amounts of drug can be extracted with a much smaller quantity of solvent. This effects tremendous economy in terms of time, energy and consequently financial inputs. At small scale, it is employed as a batch process only, but it becomes much more economical and viable when converted into a continuous extraction procedure on medium or large scale.



Aqueous Alcoholic Extraction by Fermentation

Some medicinal preparations of Ayurveda (like *asava* and *arista*) adopt the technique of fermentation for extracting the active principles. The extraction procedure involves soaking the crude drug, in the form of either a powder or a decoction (*kasaya*), for a specified period of time, during which it undergoes fermentation and generates alcohol in situ; this facilitates the extraction of the active constituents contained in the plant material. The alcohol thus generated also serves as a preservative. If the fermentation is to be carried out in an earthen vessel, it should not be new: water should first be boiled in the vessel. In large-scale manufacture, wooden vats, porcelain jars or metal vessels are used in place of earthen vessels. Some examples of such preparations are *karpurasava*, *kanakasava*, *dasmularista*. In Ayurveda, this method is not yet standardized but, with the extraordinarily high degree of advancement in fermentation technology, it should not be difficult to standardize this technique of extraction for the production of herbal drug extracts.

Counter-current Extraction

In counter-current extraction (CCE), wet raw material is pulverized using toothed disc disintegrators to produce a fine slurry. In this process, the material to be extracted is moved in one direction (generally in the form of a fine slurry) within a cylindrical extractor where it comes in contact with extraction solvent. The further the starting material moves, the more concentrated the extract becomes. Complete extraction is thus possible when the quantities of solvent and

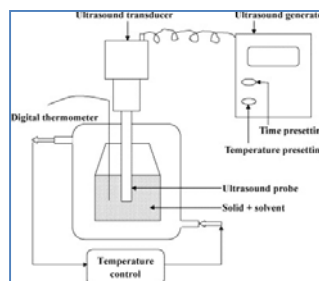
material and their flow rates are optimized. The process is highly efficient, requiring little time and posing no risk from high temperature. Finally, sufficiently concentrated extract comes out at one end of the extractor while the marc (practically free of visible solvent) falls out from the other end.

This extraction process has significant advantages:

- i) A unit quantity of the plant material can be extracted with much smaller volume of solvent as compared to other methods like maceration, decoction, percolation.
- ii) CCE is commonly done at room temperature, which spares the thermolabile constituents from exposure to heat which is employed in most other techniques.
- iii) As the pulverization of the drug is done under wet conditions, the heat generated during comminution is neutralized by water. This again spares the thermolabile constituents from exposure to heat.
- iv) The extraction procedure has been rated to be more efficient and effective than continuous hot extraction.

Ultrasound Extraction (Sonication)

The procedure involves the use of ultrasound with frequencies ranging from 20 kHz to 2000 kHz; this increases the permeability of cell walls and produces cavitation. Although the process is useful in some cases, like extraction of rauwolfia root, its large-scale application is limited due to the higher costs. One disadvantage of the procedure is the occasional but known deleterious effect of ultrasound energy (more than 20 kHz) on the active constituents of medicinal plants through formation of free radicals and consequently undesirable changes in the drug molecules.

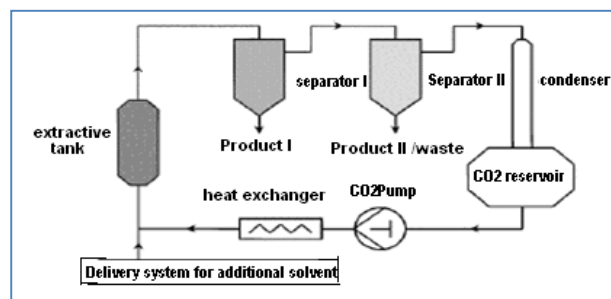


Supercritical Fluid Extraction

Supercritical fluid extraction (SFE) is an alternative sample preparation method with general goals of reduced use of organic solvents and increased sample throughput. The factors to consider include temperature, pressure, sample volume, analyte collection, modifier (cosolvent) addition, flow and pressure control, and restrictors. Generally, cylindrical extraction vessels are used for SFE and their performance is good beyond any doubt.

The collection of the extracted analyte following SFE is another important step: significant analyte loss can occur during this step, leading the analyst to believe that the actual efficiency was poor.

There are many advantages to the use of CO₂ as the extracting fluid. In addition to its favorable physical properties, carbon dioxide is inexpensive, safe and abundant. But while carbon dioxide is the preferred fluid for SFE, it possesses several polarity limitations. Solvent polarity is important when extracting polar solutes and when strong analyte-matrix interactions are present. Organic solvents are frequently added to the carbon dioxide extracting fluid to alleviate the polarity limitations. Of late, instead of carbon dioxide, argon is being used because it is inexpensive and more inert. The component recovery rates generally increase with increasing pressure or temperature: the highest recovery rates in case of argon are obtained at 500 atm and 150° C.



The extraction procedure possesses distinct advantages:

- i) The extraction of constituents at low temperature, which strictly avoids damage from heat and some organic solvents.
- ii) No solvent residues.
- iii) Environmentally friendly extraction procedure.

The largest area of growth in the development of SFE has been the rapid expansion of its applications. SFE finds extensive application in the extraction of pesticides, environmental

samples, foods and fragrances, essential oils, polymers and natural products. The major deterrent in the commercial application of the extraction process is its prohibitive capital investment.

Phytonics Process

A new solvent based on hydrofluorocarbon-134a and a new technology to optimize its remarkable properties in the extraction of plant materials offer significant environmental advantages and health and safety benefits over traditional processes for the production of high quality natural fragrant oils, flavors and biological extracts. Advanced Phytonics Limited (Manchester, UK) has developed this patented technology termed “phytonics process”. The products mostly extracted by this process are fragrant components of essential oils and biological or phytopharmacological extracts which can be used directly without further physical or chemical treatment.

The properties of the new generation of fluorocarbon solvents have been applied to the extraction of plant materials. The core of the solvent is 1,1,2,2-tetrafluoroethane, better known as hydrofluorocarbon-134a (HFC-134a). This product was developed as a replacement for chlorofluorocarbons. The boiling point of this solvent is -25° C. It is not flammable or toxic. Unlike chlorofluorocarbons, it does not deplete the ozone layer. It has a vapor pressure of 5.6 bar at ambient temperature. By most standards this is a poor solvent. For example, it does not mix with mineral oils or triglycerides and it does not dissolve plant wastes.

The process is advantageous in that the solvents can be customized: by using modified solvents with HFC-134a, the process can be made highly selective in extracting a specific class of phytoconstituents. Similarly, other modified solvents can be used to extract a broader spectrum of components. The biological products made by this process have extremely low residual solvent. The residuals are invariably less than 20 parts per billion and are frequently below levels of detection. These solvents are neither acidic nor alkaline and, therefore, have only minimal potential reaction effects on the botanical materials. The processing plant is totally sealed so that the solvents are continually recycled and fully recovered at the end of each production cycle. The only utility needed to operate these systems is electricity and, even then, they do not consume much energy. There is no scope for the escape of the solvents. Even if some solvents do escape, they contain no chlorine and therefore pose no threat to the ozone layer. The waste biomass from these plants is dry and “ecofriendly” to handle.

Advantages of the Process

- Unlike other processes that employ high temperatures, the phytonics process is cool and gentle and its products are never damaged by exposure to temperatures in excess of ambient.
- No vacuum stripping is needed which, in other processes, leads to the loss of precious volatiles.
- The process is carried out entirely at neutral pH and, in the absence of oxygen, the products never suffer acid hydrolysis damage or oxidation.
- The technique is highly selective, offering a choice of operating conditions and hence a choice of end products.
- It is less threatening to the environment.
- It requires a minimum amount of electrical energy.
- It releases no harmful emissions into the atmosphere and the resultant waste products (spent biomass) are innocuous and pose no effluent disposal problems.
- The solvents used in the technique are not flammable, toxic or ozone depleting.
- The solvents are completely recycled within the system.

Applications

The phytonics process can be used for extraction in biotechnology (e.g for the production of antibiotics), in the herbal drug industry, in the food, essential oil and flavor industries, and in the production of other pharmacologically active products. In particular, it is used in the production of top quality pharmaceutical-grade extracts, pharmacologically active intermediates, antibiotic extracts and phytopharmaceuticals. However, the fact that it is used in all these areas in no way prevents its use in other areas. The technique is being used in the extraction of high-quality essential oils, oleoresins, natural food colors, flavors and aromatic oils from all manner of plant materials. The technique is also used in refining crude products obtained from other extraction processes. It provides extraction without waxes or other contaminants. It helps remove many biocides from contaminated biomass.

Parameters for Selecting an Appropriate Extraction Method

- i) Authentication of plant material should be done before performing extraction. Any foreign matter should be completely eliminated.

ii) Use the right plant part and, for quality control purposes, record the age of plant and the time, season and place of collection.

iii) Conditions used for drying the plant material largely depend on the nature of its chemical constituents. Hot or cold blowing air flow for drying is generally preferred. If a crude drug with high moisture content is to be used for extraction, suitable weight corrections should be incorporated.

iv) Grinding methods should be specified and techniques that generate heat should be avoided as much as possible.

v) Powdered plant material should be passed through suitable sieves to get the required particles of uniform size.

vi) Nature of constituents:

a) If the therapeutic value lies in non-polar constituents, a non-polar solvent may be used. For example, lupeol is the active constituent of *Crataeva nurvala* and, for its extraction, hexane is generally used. Likewise, for plants like *Bacopa monnieri* and *Centella asiatica*, the active constituents are glycosides and hence a polar solvent like aqueous methanol may be used.

b) If the constituents are thermolabile, extraction methods like cold maceration, percolation and CCE are preferred.

For thermostable constituents, Soxhlet extraction (if nonaqueous solvents are used) and decoction (if water is the menstruum) are useful.

c) Suitable precautions should be taken when dealing with constituents that degrade while being kept in organic solvents, e.g. flavonoids and phenyl propanoids.

d) In case of hot extraction, higher than required temperature should be avoided. Some glycosides are likely to break upon continuous exposure to higher temperature.

e) Standardization of time of extraction is important, as:

- Insufficient time means incomplete extraction.
- If the extraction time is longer, unwanted constituents may also be extracted. For example, if tea is boiled for too long, tannins are extracted which impart astringency to the final preparation.

f) The number of extractions required for complete extraction is as important as the duration of each extraction.

- vii) The quality of water or menstruum used should be specified and controlled.
- viii) Concentration and drying procedures should ensure the safety and stability of the active constituents. Drying under reduced pressure (e.g. using a Rotavapor) is widely used. Lyophilization, although expensive, is increasingly employed.
- ix) The design and material of fabrication of the extractor are also to be taken into consideration.
- x) Analytical parameters of the final extract, such as TLC and HPLC fingerprints, should be documented to monitor the quality of different batches of the extracts.

Source:

Sukhdev Swami Handa, Suman Preet Singh Khanuja, Gennaro Longo, Dev Dutt Rakesh. 2008. Extraction technologies for medicinal and aromatic plants, International centre for science and high technology.