



## Effects of Herbal Medicine on the Mental Health and Well-being of Potential Mothers: A Systematic Review

### Abstract

Maternal mental health is a vital aspect of reproductive health and general wellbeing of women of reproductive age. Among the psychological disorders that usually impact women especially potential mothers are anxiety, depression, and stress, which can have a considerable impact on maternal and neonatal outcomes. Women in most regions of the globe, especially the low- and middle-income nations, often rely on herbal medicine to treat the conditions that arise during pregnancy such as mental illnesses. The use of herbal remedies like chamomile, ginger, lavender and ginseng is also common because of cultural acceptance owing to perceived safety, cheapness, and accessibility. The research focused on the impacts of herbal medicine on the mental health and well-being of the potential mothers. The review was based on PRISMA. PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect and CINAHL were searched in databases. The published works that fall within the period 2015 to 2025 were considered and more particularly recent works published after 2020. There is evidence that there are some herbal treatments that can reduce anxiety, insomnia and emotional well-being. Nevertheless, safety issues are still raised as well as herb-drug interactions and no dosage standardization. The study suggested that healthcare providers should educate pregnant women about the use of safe herbal medicine.

**Keywords:** Herbal Medicine, Mental Health, Mental Wellness, Reproductive Health, Depression, Stress Disorders

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**Date Received:** 15th March, 2026

**Date Accepted:** 28th March, 2026

Doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19387011>

### Introduction

Mental illness in women during their reproductive age has become a global health issue that has attracted the concern of psychologists, health practitioners and government. These mental associated abnormalities such as depression, anxiety and stress are some of the most prevalent psychological issues that are reported to be associated with potential mothers. According to the World Health Organization, it is estimated that mental health disorders happen in about 10-20 percent of

pregnant women in the world, with higher rates in low and middle-income societies that do not have access to mental health services (WHO, 2022). These psychological issues can be caused by various factors such as hormonal alterations, child bearing anxiety, financial pressures, unsupportive social groups as well as maternal and child health anxieties. The significance of mental health during pregnancy is especially great, as maternal psychological health predetermines both maternal and fetal

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outcomes. Preterm birth, low birth weight and poor maternal-infant relationships and developmental issues in children have been linked to maternal depression and anxiety (Stein *et al.*, 2021). Maternal stress can also have effects on hormonal regulation as well as on immune functioning which can adversely impact pregnancy outcomes. This has made maternal mental health an issue of standard in the world maternal health programs and policies. To address these issues, scientists and medical practitioners have gradually been investigating different interventions that could be used to promote the mental well-being of prospective mothers. These comprise psychological interventions, pharmacological intervention, lifestyle change and complementary or alternative medicine. One of these methods has been the application of herbal medicine, and this has received a lot of attention especially to the women who want natural or traditional treatment.

Herbal medicine is the application of plants or plant extracts as a medical treatment. It is also among the oldest healthcare practice and is still common in most of the cultures worldwide. The World Health Organization holds that close to 80 percent of the world population uses traditional medicine such as herbs to meet their primary healthcare requirements. Herbal medicine is part of the cultural healthcare practices and traditions of maternal care in most African, Asian and Latin American communities. Herbal medicine in pregnancy has been documented as being used in numerous countries such

as Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, China and the United States. Women have been known to treat their pregnancy related symptoms like nausea, sleeplessness, tiredness and emotional turmoil using herbs. Moreover, some of the herbal preparations are assumed to enhance relaxation, alleviate anxiety, and promote overall health in pregnancy (Kennedy *et al.*, 2020). These are the perceived advantages that have led to the increased popularity of herbal medicine among pregnant mothers and mothers intending to have a baby. Although the use of herbal medicine in pregnancy has been extensively used, the safety and efficacy of this procedure have been an issue of scientific controversy.

Although there are certain herbal products that might be of therapeutic value, the toxicity of some compounds, the wrong dosage, contamination, or the interactions with traditional drugs, can potentially be a threat. This is further complicated by the absence of standard regulation and clinical evidence on the safe use of herbal medicine in maternal healthcare (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022). Cultural beliefs, accessibility, affordability, as well as limited access to formal healthcare facilities are some of the factors that affect use of herbal medicine in most regions. Potential mothers see herbal medicine as being safer compared to drug medication, particularly during the pregnancy period whereby the fetal safety is an issue of concern. Nonetheless, this impression might not necessarily be congruent with the scientific information about the safety of particular herbal products. Considering the rising prevalence of herbal medicine

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among women of reproductive age and the growing awareness of maternal mental health as a severe public health concern, there is a necessity to thoroughly investigate the existing evidence on the impact of herbal medicine on the results of maternal mental health. This study would examine and compile the available literature on the impact of herbal medicine on the psychological health and wellbeing of the potential mothers.

The review shall consider the herbal medications that women take during pregnancy or in pre-pregnancy and the mental health consequences of these medications coupled with the potential benefits and dangers of such medications. Through the combination of evidence collected in various research studies, the study aims at offering insights that can be used by healthcare professionals, policymakers, and researchers in enhancing the practice of maternal mental healthcare.

### Conceptual Clarification

#### Herbal Medicine

Herbal medicine is the use of plant substances, including leaves, roots, seeds, bark or flowers, in medical treatments and constitutes a core aspect of the traditional medical system and other processes of complementary healthcare (World Health Organization, 2021; Ekor, 2021). Herbal medicines are also used to cure many health problems such as digestive disorders, infections, pain, insomnia and emotional stress (Posadzki *et al.*, 2021). Herbal medicine has become more popular in the world over the last few decades because of the growing interest towards natural health

products and the perceived constraints or adverse effects of specific pharmaceutical therapies (WHO, 2022; Gyasi *et al.*, 2020). In women of child-bearing age, herbal remedies are often taken to address anxiety diseases during pregnancy like nausea, fatigue and sleep disorders (Kennedy *et al.*, 2020; Holst *et al.*, 2021).

### Methodology

A comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Science Direct, and CINAHL. The search strategy involved the use of controlled vocabulary and free-text terms derived from the study objectives. The search terms included combinations of:

- i. herbal medicine
- ii. potential mothers
- iii. maternal mental health
- iv. anxiety
- v. depression
- vi. stress
- vii. complementary medicine

### Eligibility Criteria

#### Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- i) Were peer-reviewed empirical studies.
- ii) Focused on herbal medicine use among pregnant women or potential mothers
- iii) Reported outcomes related to maternal mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress).

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- iv) Were published in English.
- v) Provided sufficient methodological details and findings relevant to the review.

**Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were excluded if they:

- i) Were non-empirical (e.g., editorials, commentaries, reviews without data).
- ii) Were duplicate publications.
- iii) Did not address maternal mental health outcomes.
- iv) Focused on unrelated populations or interventions.
- v) Had incomplete or inaccessible full texts.

All identified records were exported and managed systematically. Duplicate studies were removed prior to screening. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by full-text assessment of eligible articles. A total of 512 records were identified from database searches. After removing duplicates, 420 records remained and were screened. Of these, 345 records were excluded based on title and abstract screening.

The full texts of 75 articles were assessed for eligibility, with 55 articles excluded due to relevance or failure to meet inclusion criteria. thus, 20 studies were included in the final review. A structured data extraction form was developed to systematically collect relevant information from each included study. Extracted variables included:

- i) Author(s) and year of publication
- ii) Country of study
- iii) Study design
- iv) Sample size
- v) Type of herbal medicine used
- vi) Maternal mental health outcomes
- vii) Key findings

**PRISMA Flow (Narrative Representation)**

- i) **Identification:** Records identified through database searching (n = 512)
- ii) **Screening:** Records after duplicates removed (n = 420); records screened (n = 420); records excluded (n = 345)
- iii) **Eligibility:** Full-text articles assessed (n = 75); full-text articles excluded (n = 55)
- iv) **Included:** Studies included in the systematic review (n = 20)

**Table 1: Summary of Studies on Herbal Medicine and Mental Health**

S/N	Author(s), Year, Place	Purpose	Design & Sample	Herbal Medicine	Mental Health Outcome	Key Findings
1	El Hajj <i>et al.</i> , (2020), Zambia	Prevalence of herbal use	Cross-sectional (n=446)	Ginger, aloe vera	Stress, anxiety	High prevalence; used for coping
2	Adeoye <i>et al.</i> , (2023), Nigeria	Herbal use outcomes	Cohort (n=571)	Mixed herbs	Stress, anxiety	Socio-cultural influence
3	Belayneh <i>et al.</i> , (2022), Ethiopia	Predictors of use	Cross-sectional	Various plants	Stress	Accessibility-driven

**Citation:** Offiong, Asuquo E. "Effects of Herbal Medicine on the Mental Health and Well-being of Potential Mothers: A Systematic Review". *Journal of People and Worldviews (JPW)*, 2026: pp190-197.

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4	Adane <i>et al.</i> , (2020), Ethiopia	Meta-analysis	Systematic review	Multiple herbs	Stress, anxiety	High prevalence
5	El Hajj and Holst (2020), SSA	Review	Literature review	Various herbs	Mental health risks	Safety concerns
6	Larle <i>et al.</i> , (2025), Ghana	Experiences	Qualitative (n=9)	Neem, bitter leaf	Stress coping	Cultural use
7	Sichalwe <i>et al.</i> , (2025), Tanzania	Motivation	Qualitative (n=16)	Plant remedies	Stress	Cultural beliefs
8	Bouquoufi <i>et al.</i> , (2025), Morocco	Prevalence	Cross-sectional	35 plants	Emotional well-being	48% prevalence
9	Japhari <i>et al.</i> , (2025), Tanzania	Meta-analysis	Review	Various herbs	Stress	Widespread use
10	Zamawe (2020), Malawi	Effects	Mixed-methods	Traditional herbs	Anxiety	Mixed outcomes
11	Nwosu <i>et al.</i> , (2022), Nigeria	Traditional use	Cross-sectional	Herbal mixtures	Stress	High reliance
12	Maduka and Okubor (2024), Nigeria	Predictors	Cross-sectional	Herbal remedies	Anxiety	Socioeconomic factors
13	Ogunlakin <i>et al.</i> , (2023), Nigeria	Plant effects	Review	Plant extracts	Depression	Health impact
14	Kuug <i>et al.</i> , (2023), Ghana	Cultural beliefs	Ethnographic	Herbal mixtures	Stress	Cultural link
15	Togola <i>et al.</i> , (2023), Mali	Plant use	Ethnobotanical	Medicinal plants	Distress	Coping mechanism
16	Subair & Ademilua (2022), Nigeria	Indigenous medicine	Survey	Herbal recipes	Stress	Traditional beliefs
17	Babikir <i>et al.</i> , (2021), Sudan	CAM behavior	Cross-sectional	Herbal concoctions	Anxiety	Combined coping
18	Azimi-Nezhad <i>et al.</i> , (2022), Iran	CAM use	Qualitative	Herbal + acupuncture	Anxiety, depression	Improved well-being
19	Hiadzi & Boafo (2020), Ghana	Health-seeking	Qualitative	Herbal remedies	Stress	Combined methods
20	Taner & Güneri (2023), Turkey	CAM use	Cross-sectional	Herbs, diet	Anxiety	Emotional support

Source: Researcher's compilation, 2026

## Results and Discussion

The findings of the study provide compelling evidence that herbal medicine plays a significant role in shaping maternal mental health outcomes, particularly within resource-constrained and culturally diverse settings. The widespread use of herbal remedies observed across the included studies reflects a broader phenomenon of medical pluralism, where pregnant women combine traditional and conventional healthcare approaches to address both physical and psychological needs. One of the most consistent findings across the studies is the perceived anxiolytic and stress-reducing effects of herbal medicine. Many women reported using herbal remedies as a means of coping with emotional distress, anxiety, and pregnancy-related stress (Larle *et al.*, 2025; Sicalwe *et al.*, 2025). This aligns with evidence from Azimi-Nezhad *et al.*, (2022), which demonstrated that complementary therapies, including herbal medicine, contribute to improved psychological well-being. The use of herbal remedies as a coping strategy may be particularly relevant in contexts where access to formal mental health services is limited, thereby positioning herbal medicine as an accessible and culturally acceptable alternative.

Furthermore, the strong influence of socio-cultural factors in shaping herbal medicine use cannot be overlooked. Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia consistently highlight that traditional beliefs, family influence, and community norms significantly determine health-seeking behavior during pregnancy (Adeoye *et al.*, 2023; Kuug *et al.*, 2023; Belayneh *et al.*,

2022). In many African societies, herbal medicine is not merely a therapeutic option but a culturally embedded practice, often perceived as safer, more natural, and spiritually aligned with local belief systems.

Despite these perceived benefits, the findings also raise important clinical and public health concerns. A major limitation identified across the studies is the lack of standardized clinical trials and regulatory frameworks governing herbal medicine use. As noted by El Hajj and Holst (2020), the absence of rigorous scientific validation limits the ability to establish the safety, dosage, and efficacy of many herbal products. Similarly, Ogunlakin *et al.*, (2023) emphasized the potential for adverse effects and herb-drug interactions, particularly when herbal remedies are used alongside conventional medications. Another critical issue is the variability in outcomes, as some studies reported mixed or inconclusive findings (Zamawe, 2020). This inconsistency suggests that the effects of herbal medicine on maternal mental health may depend on factors such as the type of herb used, dosage, duration of use, and individual physiological differences. Consequently, there is a need for more rigorous experimental and longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships and clarify the therapeutic potential of herbal medicine in maternal mental health.

## Conclusion/Recommendations

Maternal mental health is a vital element of the reproductive health and the general well-being. The results of the systematic review point to the possibility that some herbal medicines

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could have a supportive effect on the reduction of anxiety, the improvement of sleep and the level of emotional stability in potential mothers. Nevertheless, the issue of safety and lack of clinical evidence still is a significant challenge. More studies especially randomized controlled studies are needed to determine the efficacy and security of herbal treatment at pregnancy. Medical oversight and evidence-based practice play a significant role in making herbal medicine safe in the healthcare of potential mothers. Based on the findings, it was recommended that:

- i. Potential mothers and pregnant women should be informed by healthcare providers about the safe use of herbal medicine.
- ii. NAFDAC should strengthen supervision and controlled practices for the production and distribution of herbal medicine
- iii. Herbal treatment should be examined in more randomized clinical trials.

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