

Good for what ails you

Tea tree leaves have antiviral, antifungal and antibacterial properties

By DR. RALLIE MCALLISTER

11/9/2004

There's little doubt that antibiotics are overused in the United States, and disease-causing organisms are retaliating by growing increasingly resistant to the drugs. With this in mind, scientists are working hard to develop modern medicines that will keep us a step ahead in the battle on bugs. They may have found a new weapon in an old remedy: tea tree oil.

The Aborigines of Australia have used the leaves of the tea tree medicinally for centuries, but the English explorer James Cook is usually credited with the discovery of tea tree oil. After sailing to Australia in 1770, Captain Cook and his men brewed a tea from the leaves of the native trees in hopes of preventing scurvy.

In 1925, an Australian chemist found that the leaves of the tea tree had significant antiviral, antifungal and antibacterial properties. He reported that the essential oil of leaves was 12 times more potent than carbolic acid, the most powerful antiseptic substance available at the time.

During World War II, Australian troops carried vials of tea tree oil in their first aid kits for treating everything from head lice to trench foot. The Australian government relied so heavily on the medicinal oil that it exempted tea tree growers and plantation workers from serving in the armed forces. Today, folks in the land down under use the substance as a standard household remedy for cuts, insect bites and a host of skin conditions. The Aussies also use the oil to sanitize their bathrooms and rid their pets of fleas and ticks.

The latest research has demonstrated the oil's ability to kill a broad spectrum of bacteria, including those that have become resistant to some modern-day antibiotics. In the treatment of minor cuts and burns, the oil's anti-inflammatory properties reduce swelling and pain, while

its antibacterial action kills invading organisms and reduces the risk of infection.

Tea tree oil is useful as a treatment for a variety of fungal infections of the scalp, skin and nails. When compared to over-the-counter antifungal medications, the oil produces nearly identical results in the treatment of ringworm, dandruff and athletes' foot.

Tea tree oil has been shown to clear acne as effectively as the more popular benzoyl peroxide products. Because the oil is less caustic to the skin than traditional acne remedies, it produces fewer unwelcome side effects, like skin irritation and dryness.

Fungal infections of toenails, which are typically very resistant to treatment, improve dramatically with regular application of tea tree oil. Because the oil is a strong organic solvent, it is able to penetrate even the thickest nails to reach the fungi responsible for the problem. The natural remedy doesn't work as fast as the modern oral medications, but it is much less expensive. Because the newer antifungal pills are potentially toxic to the liver, tea tree oil is considered to be a safer alternative.

The antiviral properties of tea tree oil make it a suitable treatment for skin afflictions caused by the herpes family of viruses, including cold sores, shingles and warts. A recent study found that when cold sore sufferers applied diluted tea tree oil to their lips, their lesions healed in approximately nine days, while the cold sores of untreated volunteers took an average of 13 days to heal.

Although doctors are beginning to recognize the healing properties of tea tree oil, most advise their patients to use small amounts of the medicine with big doses of caution. Like other essential oils, tea tree oil is slightly toxic in its pure form and should not be swallowed. Because it is a mild irritant, it should never be applied in its concentrated form to skin, lips or mucous

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membranes. You can buy tea tree oil in a diluted state, or you can dilute it yourself with mineral oil or olive oil.

An estimated 20 percent of people are allergic to the oil, so it's important to test yourself for sensitivity before you start slathering it on your skin. To see if you'll have a reaction, dab a drop or two of the oil on the inside of your forearm and allow it to sit for a few days. If you develop a skin rash, hives, or itching, tea tree oil probably isn't for you.

The multiple uses of tea tree oil make it a handy medicine to have around the house. You might want to make a little room in your modern-day medicine cabinet for a bottle of this ancient remedy.

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