



Old School Remedies Doctors Love

Today, we rely a lot on modern medicine and drugs. But, many times, our grandparents relied on cures that could be found in the kitchen. As it turns out, that trove is still rich with effective remedies.

In fact, even modern medicine relies on plants more than many of us realize, says Catherine Ulbricht, PharmD, senior attending pharmacist at Massachusetts General Hospital and chief editor of publications for the Natural Standard Research Collaboration, which evaluates scientific data on herbs.

"Practically all of the most widely used drugs have an herbal origin," Ulbricht says. "The number one OTC medication, aspirin, is a synthetic version of a compound found in the willow tree. Many statins are based on fungi; and Tamiflu originated from Chinese star anise."

Following, you'll find a host of age-old remedies whose remarkable effectiveness has been confirmed by new research. Because botanical medicines can interact with other drugs, consult your doctor before taking them. The exceptions are the common food items—onions, parsley, and cayenne—when consumed in natural form and conventional amounts.

Lemon Balm

Tradition says: *Melissa officinalis*, a lemon-scented member of the mint family, has long been used to banish anxiety, boost memory, and aid sleep and digestion. It is "good against the biting of venomous beasts, comforts the heart, and driveth away all melancholy and sadness," wrote Elizabethan-era herbalist John Gerard in 1597.

Got a presentation or other stressful situation to deal with? A cup of tea made of lemon balm may help you sleep soundly the night before and keep you calm and focused.

Research suggests this plant is effective in extreme situations too. Four weeks of lemon balm aromatherapy cut agitation in patients with severe dementia, reports a 2002 study in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*.

Lemon balm appears to calm an overactive thyroid (Graves' disease), according to Eric Yarnell, ND, an assistant professor of botanical medicine at Bastyr University. It also fights viruses; recent studies indicate that lemon balm cream speeds healing of oral herpes lesions and reduces the frequency of outbreaks.

Get the benefit: For lemon balm's calming effects, try a daily tea made with one-half to one full dropper of tincture or 1 to 2 teaspoons of dried herb steeped in 1 cup of hot water for 5 to 10 minutes, says herbalist Linda Different Cloud, a PhD candidate in ethnobotany at Montana State University. Ask your doctor first if you take thyroid medication, as the botanical may change the amount you need. To use topically, follow the instructions on OTC creams, such as Cold Sore Relief or WiseWays Herbals Lemon Balm Cream, available online or at drugstores or health food stores.

Onions

Tradition says: Onions are considered cure-alls in many cultures. In Middle Eastern traditional medicine, they were prescribed for diabetes. During the early 20th century in the United States, William Boericke, MD, recommended onions for respiratory and digestive problems in his influential medical treatise, *Homeopathic Materia Medica*. Believing that onions would help improve athletic performance, ancient Greek Olympians scarfed them down, drank their juice, and rubbed them on their bodies before competitions.

Research proves: A stack of new studies has confirmed many old-time uses of onions. Their thiosulfates (sulfur compounds responsible for their smell) reduce diabetes symptoms and protect against cardiovascular disease. Quercetin, a flavonoid found in onions, prevents the inflammation associated with allergies and also protects against stomach ulcers and colon, esophageal, and breast cancers. And it looks like the ancient Olympians had it right: A 2010 study in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* found that quercetin extract increased endurance by 13%.

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Get the benefit: Onions may keep the doctor away even better than apples do. Your body absorbs quercetin from onions at least 3 times faster than it does from apples (or from tea, another top source), says a report for the Federation of European Biochemical Societies. To get the most thiosulfates, choose red or yellow onions. "The more colorful, the better," says Michael Havey, PhD, a USDA geneticist and University of Wisconsin professor of horticulture. Heat diminishes the thiosulfates, so eat onions raw or lightly cooked, Havey adds. "Make them a regular part of a vegetable- and fruit-filled diet."

Cayenne Pepper

Tradition says: Columbus is credited with transporting cayenne peppers—also called chiles, after their Aztec name, *chil*—from the New World to the Old. Consumed in the Americas for some 7,000 years, the fiery-flavored pods reminded the explorer of black pepper, a highly prized—and pricey—spice in Europe at the time. The easy-to-grow chile quickly assumed a central role in traditional cookery and remedies worldwide; folk medicine practitioners used it for everything from pain relief to aphrodisiacs.

Research proves: Capsaicin, the ingredient that gives cayenne its heat, is best known today for pain relief—easing muscle aches, postoperative discomfort, and arthritis. Studies show that it tamps down chemical messengers that transmit pain messages in the brain. The latest research indicates that the sizzling spice may also assist in weight control. A 2009 paper in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reports that capsaicin-related compounds helped people lose abdominal fat. Cayenne also appears to control blood sugar. Study participants who ate a lunch containing capsaicin had higher blood levels of a sugar-regulating hormone and less ghrelin, the "hunger hormone," than those who ate a bland meal, reported the *European Journal of Nutrition* last year.

Get the benefit: For pain relief, follow package instructions on OTC capsaicin ointments and creams, including Zostrix or Capzasin-HP Arthritis Pain Relief, available in drugstores or online. No dose has been established for weight control; however, cayenne peppers are on the FDA's Generally Recognized As Safe list, so add fresh chiles to taste in your favorite dishes (or, more conveniently, powdered cayenne, available in supermarkets). Chop finely, then cook them in soups and stews or add them uncooked to salad dressings.

Plantain

Tradition says: Plantain, or *Plantago major*, a low-growing, oval-leaved plant found all over the globe, is a traditional remedy for skin ailments. Hildegard von Bingen, a 12th-century Benedictine abbess, healer, composer, and eventually saint, suggested applying it to insect bites in her renowned medical treatise, *Physica*. Native Americans apply plantain poultices to insect stings, wounds, burns, and more, says Different Cloud, who lives on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North and South Dakota. (Note: Do not confuse this leafy plant with a very different, banana-like tropical fruit that happens to have the same name.)

Research proves: The plant's antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties help heal breaks in the skin, researchers have found. Its soothing effects work internally too: Psyllium, the seed of one type of plantain, is the source of the fiber in some laxatives.

