

Kitchen Spice Medicine

by Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

We are healthy when our personal energy flows in harmony with Gaia's greater energy flow. When we lose this balance we become ill. Mother nature communicates with us by sending us messages in the form of disease symptoms. If we are perceptive and wise, these messages cause us to stop what we're doing so we can uncover and correct the source of the imbalance. This allows our innate healing process to begin repairing whatever has been damaged. As we are healed, we reach a new balance with our surroundings, and become well once again.

Since prehistoric times, humans have instinctively known how to benefit from the countless herbs that mother nature has provided for our healing. Because of millennia of co-evolution, these medicinal plants often contain ideal chemical compounds that are pharmacologically "active" with minimal side effects. But beyond this, their more subtle qualities can also help bring our spirits back into tune with the planet's natural rhythms, promoting a deeper level of healing. That's because when we open ourselves to the energy of healing herbs we realize how intimately connected we are with the planetary web of life. When we see ourselves as part of the whole, it's easier to hear the healing messages that can guide us towards lasting vitality and health.

During recent generations our civilized lives have created separations between us and mother nature's timeless wisdom. Many have yielded control of their health to expert professionals, placing their faith in the scientific innovations of the moment. Much of modern medical care is now dominated by an alliance of pharmaceutical and insurance corporations and government agencies. Instead of heeding the messages of illness, we've been conditioned to reach for the quick fixes of high tech medicines. This approach often covers up the underlying problem's roots, until they surface again at a more advanced stage of disease.

This disturbing trend is being finally being reversed, as more and more people take responsibility for their own health care. But even the current renaissance in herbal and natural medicines is being distorted and exploited by corporate interests. Many popular herbs, such as golden seal and ginseng are now endangered in their native habitats by reckless over harvesting. Other herbs are being mass marketed as exotic consumer commodities, to be processed with toxic fumigants and even irradiated before being encapsulated and wrapped in plastic for sale.

But herbal medicines needn't be a collection of esoteric pills and capsules grown and imported from far away lands. Herbal medicine is our birthright, plain and simple and always all around us. If we want to be in harmony with mother nature's healing energy, it's best to open our eyes and hearts and get in touch with the familiar medicines surrounding us. In this spirit, I present the healing properties of a few of the familiar medicines that already are waiting for us in our spice racks, window boxes and gardens.

Cayenne is a valuable tonic herb with a wide range of health benefits. It's a metabolic and circulatory stimulant that strengthens the heart muscle, so important in the face of our current epidemic of heart disease. Regular use of cayenne as a seasoning can lower elevated blood pressure and inhibit formation of pathologic blood clots, reducing risk of heart attacks and strokes. Cayenne increases blood flow to the fingers and toes, helpful for those with poor peripheral circulation.

Cayenne is also a strong expectorant that thins respiratory mucous secretions. This, combined with its antiviral and antibacterial properties can be very helpful for treating asthma and bronchitis. Cayenne is a digestive stimulant that helps balance gut ecology when there's an overgrowth of pathologic bacteria, yeast or intestinal parasites.

Taken internally, cayenne releases endorphins, easing the experience of pain and causing mild euphoria. Capsaicin, one of cayenne's active components is FDA approved for topical use as pain reliever for neuralgia and shingles. It's best to take cayenne in combination with cooling foods such as yogurt, and to gradually increase the dose as you develop tolerance for its intense fiery flavor.

Garlic, onions and leeks have been promoted as overall tonics since the earliest Egyptian and Chinese medical texts were written over 4000 years ago. As with all herbal medicines, it's best to buy organic garlic, or better yet: grow it yourself. It's very easy to grow and is good for your garden too!

Garlic contains natural antibiotic compounds that are active against bacteria, viruses, yeast and parasites, yet are safe and gentle on the human system. These can be taken internally, extracted in olive oil and applied as ear drops for treating ear infections, or used in poultices for skin infections. Bacteria don't develop resistance to garlic as they do to allopathic antibiotics. Its active antibiotic principles are destroyed by heat, so use raw garlic when treating infections.

Garlic also stimulates your own immune response, preventing colds, the "flu" and other respiratory viruses. Its immune stimulant effect helps to destroy cancer cells, and is being investigated for use in AIDS and other immune deficiency diseases. Garlic is also an expectorant & decongestant, always helpful when treating bronchitis and pneumonia.

Regular use of garlic lowers elevated blood pressure, and reduces harmful LDL cholesterol levels and pathologic blood clot formation. It also can help balance gut ecology, especially important when taking antibiotics. It's also a liver tonic that assists this vital organ in ridding the blood of a variety of toxins. If you're troubled by its distinctive odor, try chewing fennel seeds or parsley, or use deodorized garlic capsules.

Honey is one of many medicines that are made by bees. I think of honey as a divine nectar containing the most healing nature of a flower's essence. It's important to get honey from bees that pollinate organic fields and orchards, as it otherwise tends to concentrate harmful pesticide

residues.

Honey contains natural antibiotics that kill staphylococcus, E. coli and many other bacteria. It can be applied topically for healing wounds and burns. In tea it's excellent for treating respiratory infections and soothing irritated sore throats. Those who suffer from seasonal allergies find that regular use of unfiltered locally honey can greatly reduce their symptoms.

Honey is high in the sedative amino acid tryptophan, so useful for treating insomnia and anxiety. It's also a gentle laxative, yet because of its antibiotic properties is helpful for treating infectious diarrhea and dysentery. It's best not to feed raw honey to infants under one year old because of a mostly theoretical risk of botulism.

Apple cider vinegar is another way that an apple a day keeps the doctor away. It's an overall digestive and circulatory tonic that is very rich in biologically available potassium and a variety of trace minerals. Try combining two teaspoons of raw unfiltered vinegar made from organic apples with the same amount of honey in a glass of warm water before each meal and at bedtime. This remedy has been used for ages to relieve fatigue, muscle cramps, weak digestion and the pain and stiffness of arthritis and rheumatism.

Apple cider vinegar can also help strengthen heart function while lowering blood pressure. It's an excellent liver tonic for those who suffer from chronic inflammations and fatigue when used in combination with an overall "spring cleaning" program.

Ginger is a tonic stimulant that benefits circulation, digestion and overall energy. It's especially useful for treating acute and chronic indigestion, gas, bloating and colic or to stimulate a sluggish digestive system. Ginger is the premier remedy for motion sickness, nausea and for many cases of vertigo.

Ginger tea sweetened with honey is excellent for inducing perspiration and lowering fevers when you suffer from influenza and other febrile illnesses. It's also helpful for relieving congestion in colds, bronchitis and sinus infections. Try gargling with ginger tea and honey to ease the pain of a sore throat.

Ginger contains the natural anti-inflammatory curcumin, also found in the spice turmeric, and is beneficial when internally and externally for a variety of inflammations. Apply a ginger poultice on swellings, sprains and muscle pain and to remedy poor peripheral circulation.

Chamomile, the herb most favored by Peter Rabbit's grandmother, is another herb that's practically a panacea for a wide range of health problems. It's one of the safest sedatives for children and adults of all ages in this fast paced world. A cup of strong chamomile tea with milk and honey is one of my favorite remedies for everyday anxiety and insomnia. Or, it can be added to an infant's (or your own) warm bath to calm an agitated child. Chamomile also is a muscle relaxing herb that relieves digestive and muscle spasms without reducing alertness.

Chamomile's anti-inflammatory properties are very useful for relieving fevers. Its helpful for treating a wide range of internal and external inflammations, ranging from peptic ulcers, irritable bowel and colitis, to asthma and the aches and chills of influenza. Its anti-microbial properties make it especially helpful for treating skin and eye infections. Chamomile's delightful aroma and pleasant taste make it a wonderful soothing tea for just about anything that ails you.

I could continue on about the healing virtues of many other familiar kitchen spice medicines such as basil, dill, fennel, flax, hops, lavender, licorice, marshmallow, mustard, mint, oregano, parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. But my point is simply to help us open our eyes and see at least a few of the many healing medicines that mother nature has provided for our healing. I wish we all will become more aware of the simple opportunities for healing that surround us always, wherever we find ourselves. I hope to continue this theme next month by inviting us to explore our spring gardens, lawns, hedgerows and vacant lots for "weeds" that heal.

As always, this overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions please consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, board-certified family physician, is a graduate of Yale University School of Medicine and the California School of Herbal Studies. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.