

Tonic boom: home remedies

Modern research is finding there's more than a grain of truth in some homespun herbal remedies

Nancy Churnin

Jan 03, 2011

Peppermint oil to help irritable bowel syndrome; chilli seed rub to ease aching joints; lavender to aid sleep; hibiscus-flower tea to lower blood pressure - once dismissed by science as superstition and folklore, herbal and natural cures such as these are winning new respect from medical experts.

Not only are they being recommended with increasing frequency, modern researchers are doing studies that find that many of these cures possess active biological agents that do just what grandma told you they would.

One of the latest signs of how seriously such treatments are being taken is the new Mayo Clinic Book of Home Remedies. It's not the first book to deal with home remedies - syndicated columnists Joe and Teresa Graedon of the People's Pharmacy have several, and an online search for home remedies gets millions of hits - but this carries the name of the prestigious Minnesota organisation.

The book's focus on remedies that have been backed up by medical science helped win over Dr Seema Modi, a geriatrician and family physician at Baylor Medical Centre in Texas. Modi has many patients who have expressed interest in home remedies. Because such treatments are not always grounded in research, she had reservations about the book when she first saw the title.

"I was expecting, 'Try a bar of soap between the sheets for leg cramps' - that's what I think of when I hear home remedies," she says. "But it's not that. To me this is like a book of medical common sense I wish I could prescribe to all my patients."

When the book does bring up suggestions such as cranberry pills or extract to cure bladder infections, an idea that some of Modi's patients believe in more than she does, it is with the caveat that the authors have not found a rigorous study to support this course of action.

The book provides helpful information about the cranberry remedy - that it shouldn't be used with the blood-thinning medication warfarin, because interactions between cranberry juice and warfarin, an anticoagulant prescribed to prevent blood clots, may cause bleeding.

Pharmacologist Joe Graedon has been an advocate of such treatments for more than three decades. His latest book, co-written with his wife, nutritionist Teresa Graedon, is *Recipes and Remedies From the People's Pharmacy*. It focuses on how to cook with foods that can be used medicinally: a beet juice smoothie to lower blood pressure, persimmon punch for heartburn and a power pudding of prune juice

bran and apple sauce for constipation. Their recipe for curcumin scramble praises curcumin's anti-inflammatory properties.

The Graedons also offer some information on remedies that have not been proven, such as Listerine for treating lice. "If it might help and it won't hurt and it's affordable, why not give it a try?" Joe Graedon says.

Home-generated ideas - such as curcumin - are also generating excitement among researchers. Dr Ajay Goel, a researcher at the Gastrointestinal Cancer Research Laboratory at Baylor University Medical Centre in Dallas, says he has found great promise in testing curcumin, found in the Indian spice turmeric, for treating cancer.

"Curcumin can achieve all of the goodness of chemotherapy, is inexpensive and absolutely safe. There has been growing interest in using such compounds for both prevention as well as treatment, and none of this is going unnoticed by GI oncologists."

Dr Philip Hagen, a preventive and internal medicine physician at the Mayo Clinic who co-edited the Mayo Clinic book, says he's seen home remedies gain increased acceptance in the past 10 to 15 years.

"I think the public was ahead of doctors in embracing some of these things. I think there's a willingness of scientists and physicians to be open to saying there may be a biological reason that this works and doing a study to see if it does."

He found that peppermint oil eased irritable bowel syndrome because it contains a relaxant that settles the smooth muscle action of the large colon.

Knowing why it worked is helpful because it alerts doctors to potential side effects, he says. While peppermint oil relaxes the large colon, it also relaxes the smooth muscle valve at the bottom of the food pipe, which can worsen heartburn.

Lavender, a popular remedy for insomnia and anxiety since the Middle Ages, has been shown to increase slow-wave sleep in which the heartbeat slows and muscles relax, according to a 2005 study by psychologists at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

Scientists have found that chilli seed rubs, which have been popular for centuries, contain capsaicin, which studies have shown to relieve arthritic symptoms and improve joint flexibility by stopping the destruction of cartilage.

While the above remedies can all be found in the Mayo Clinic book, the hibiscus-flower tea comes from a recent People's Pharmacy column in which the Graedons refer to two studies: one in the January Journal of Ethnopharmacology that shows the red pigments in hibiscus flowers are anthocyanins that act like antihypertensive medicines called ACE inhibitors, and another in the February Journal of Nutrition that demonstrates that several cups of this tea a day can help lower blood pressure in people with mild hypertension.

Interest in home remedies has swelled as the cost of doctor visits and prescriptions strain household budgets, Hagen says.

Joe Graedon agrees. When he and his wife started their People's Pharmacy column years ago, many "turned their noses up" at the home remedies he included. Interest has grown in their syndicated column. They also have enthusiastic fans for the remedies on their website at peoplespharmacy.com.

Hagen says he continues to be open to learning about home remedies. Some of his favourites are the simplest: duct tape on a wart and salt water for several ailments from sinus inflammation caused by allergies to sore throats and colds.

"It strikes me as amusing that something as cheap as salt and warm water can do so much. I often joke that I should keep a vial of saline in my medicine cabinet."

McClatchy-Tribune