



Herbal Healing of the Past & Present

Ye Olde Remedies for Common Conditions:

General Illness

“Fresh air is absolutely necessary.”

“Set pots near the bed with some aromatic plants growing in them such as lavender or mint”

Lavender is still used in aromatherapy today to help with sleep and relaxation.



Headache

“Rub camphor oil or chamomile oil onto forehead”

Chamomile has been shown to have anti-inflammatory properties as well as acting as a sedative.

Camphor oil is the main component of most modern vapour rubs used to clear sinuses.



Sore Throat

“A lemon squeezed into a pint of water and sweetened to the taste of treacle is of considerable utility”

Lemon and honey has been shown to soothe a sore throat and is often put in lozenges.



Fatigue

“The medicinal qualities of coffee seem to be derived from the grateful sensation which it produces in the stomach and from the anti-sedative powers it exerts...adverse effects include tremor, addiction and suspension of sleep” Caffeine is a well-known stimulant and the side-effects mentioned are still true today.



Pain

“Opiates may be safely and happily administered” - usually made from red and white poppy seeds.

Modern opiate pain relief such as morphine are derived from similar compounds to those found in poppy seeds.



Scurvy

“Fresh orange or lemon peel mixed with vinegar rubbed against the gums will cure any sailor of scurvy”

We now know scurvy is caused by a deficiency in vitamin C which leads to bleeding gums.

High concentrations of vitamin C is found in citrus fruit.



Unproven remedies:

Abdominal cramps - Rosemary
Cancer - Carrot and water paste
Cough - Cumin seeds or liquorice
Epilepsy - Ginger or mistletoe
Haemorrhage - Dragon's blood

Headache - Dry red rose and vinegar paste
Heartburn - Milk or green tea leaves
Inflammation - Camphor oil
Jaundice - Lemon peel
Kidney stones - Limewater or coffee beans

Lethargy - Coriander
Tastelessness - Horse radish
Toothache - Elderflower
Vomiting - Cinnamon
Wound healing - Aloe paste



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Plant-based medicines used today:

Foxglove (Digitalis lanata or purpurea)

Foxglove grows in central and western Europe and was traditionally used as medication by the Druids. It first entered the London Pharmacopoeia in the 16th Century to treat dropsy - a generalised condition involving oedema. The modern drug, Digoxin, was manufactured using the components of Foxglove and is still used today to treat heart failure and atrial fibrillation.



St. John's Wort (Hypericum perforatum)

St. John's Wort is widely used as a herbal remedy for depression.

It inhibits the reuptake of certain neurotransmitters in the same way that modern antidepressants work. Certain countries in Europe and Asia prescribe St. John's Wort for mild depression or mood disorders in children. Due to the metabolism of the herb in the liver, it is also known to cause adverse effects when combined with other medication.

Valerian (Valeriana officinalis)

Hippocrates described Valerian as a remedy for insomnia, the very condition it is still used to treat today! Valerian has some hypnotic and sedative properties and was often used in women's perfume in the 16th Century. It is also available as a herbal remedy for anxiety, stress and as a muscle relaxant.



The Curse of Deadly Nightshade - "Atropa Belladonna"



- ◊ Belladonna is Italian for "beautiful lady" and this plant was used to form cosmetic eye drops intended to dilate and enlarge the pupils in order to make women appear more beautiful and more aroused.
- ◊ The active part of the plant inhibits the parasympathetic nervous system which is responsible for controlling the size of the pupils but also the salivary glands and heart rate.
- ◊ Frequent use of the eye drops had so many side effects (including irregular heart beats or arrhythmias) that it was nicknamed "deadly nightshade" and was taken off the market.
- ◊ Some common symptoms included, "dryness of the throat, giddiness, staggering, flushed face, dilated pupils and sometimes even delirium"
- ◊ "Atropine" is still used today to treat conditions such as bradycardia (slow heart rate) and by eye doctors.



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