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2014 9.09 Health Matters Peppermint

This is Health Matters, with a report on peppermint. The first in our series on herbal remedies that can be as effective as over-the-counter formulas -- at a fraction of the cost.

When the Europeans brought peppermint to North America, they had been using it as a medicine for centuries, but they soon learned that American Indians were well aware of mint's therapeutic value. Tribes across the continent used native mint species to treat upset stomach, cramps, indigestion, backache and other ailments. Europeans used peppermint as a treatment for sores, wounds, venereal disease, colds, indigestion and headaches. They also used it as a tooth polisher. European peppermint and other non-native mints quickly naturalized throughout the North American continent.

Peppermint is a multi-purpose herb that is included in dozens and dozens of herbal remedies. Because it has such broad-spectrum value, having a peppermint patch is a good start on a medicinal herb garden. Peppermint is a cross between water mint and spearmint, and it's easy to grow. Like most mints, peppermint spreads readily, so it's best to plant a patch where it won't invade other plantings.

Both wild and cultivated mints have similar medicinal properties. Wild horsemint and peppermint, however, have stronger medicinal action than spearmint. As spearmint is milder, it is usually recommended for children. The volatile oils in peppermint alleviate problems arising in the digestive tract, the respiratory system, the skin, and the muscles. It even enhances mental function and reduces inflammation. Its use as a digestive aid is perhaps the most well known. It works by soothing digestive muscles. From indigestion to the pain associated with irritable bowel syndrome, peppermint delivers relief, usually in the form of a tea.

But, there is a body of evidence supporting the use of peppermint oil capsules for irritable bowel syndrome, a chronic condition that can be painful. While peppermint is not usually recommended for children, it has been used in the oil capsule form to treat children suffering with the pain of irritable bowel syndrome. A trial use of peppermint oil capsules for adults found that 75% of the patients found their pain reduced by 50%.

A simple cup of peppermint tea relieves more common digestive problems, such as nausea, heartburn, indigestion and even morning sickness. Peppermint tea is also a remedy for respiratory ailments, including colds and flu, bronchial infections and coughing. Recent studies have found that peppermint inhibits histamine release, which indicates that peppermint relieves hay fever, other allergic symptoms and asthma. A 2009 study of inhaled peppermint essential oil found that it rapidly relieved inflammation caused by tuberculosis. Another study of peppermint essential oil found that it enhanced memory and increased alertness. In future broadcasts, we'll report on other essential oils.

Peppermint is both cooling and soothing. At the same time it helps reduce fever and inflammation. A few drops of peppermint essential oil rubbed into the wrist and on to a cloth that you then inhale can bring surprising relief from a tension headache. Peppermint essential oil is used topically for pain, and its effectiveness has been studied in a variety of contexts, from muscle pain to shingles-associated pain. To use peppermint oil for muscle pain, you rub a few drops into the affected area, or put a few drops in your bathwater. Peppermint essential oil in diluted forms is also used for hair and skin care. A few drops blended into massage oil or olive oil can relieve an itchy scalp and reduce dandruff. It also helps to remove lice.

Peppermint has anti-microbial action, which is why it has been used for so many centuries in preparations for cleaning the teeth. Contemporary studies confirm that peppermint acts as a barrier to bacteria that decay teeth. Other studies show that mint oils can dissolve gallstones, although this can take months to achieve.

Peppermint is as good a plant as any for starting a medicinal herb garden. An herb garden is easy to plant, and easy to maintain and harvest. Once you have peppermint on hand, it can be used in a variety of remedies. As mentioned above, it needs its own patch of ground because its roots spread quickly. We'll have more information on medicinal herbs in the coming weeks.

Health Matters is a production of KIDE Hoopa CA. Produced and written by Cynthia Poten.

Engineered by Joseph Orozco. Our readers were Jay Renzuli and Joseph Orozco. For this audio and more information, visit our download area at www.kidefm.org. Thank you for listening.

Sources and Links

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