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Foods That Heal

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Sherry Torkos, pharmacist and author of The Canadian Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine came by to talk with us about the healing power of foods. Here are some of her recommendations for managing common ailments:

Ginger - has a long history of use for alleviating stomach problems. Ginger contains very potent anti-inflammatory compounds called gingerols. Modern research has found that it can help relieve nausea and gas, and soothe the intestinal tract. One study found ginger superior to dimenhydrinate, a common ingredient in OTC motion sickness products. Ginger reduces all symptoms associated with motion sickness including dizziness, nausea, vomiting, and cold sweating. Ginger is found in some prenatal supplements as it can alleviate nausea and vomiting from pregnancy. Look for Pregnancy + Ginger by femMED (www.femmed.com). Also consider ginger tea, real ginger ale or ginger tablets. Pure ginger root is very pungent. To make your own ginger ale, combine freshly grated ginger, lemon juice, cane juice or honey and carbonated water.


Peppermint - Mint is an ancient herb used since antiquity for its culinary, medicinal and aromatic properties. Several studies have shown the ability of peppermint oil to relieve symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, including indigestion, dyspepsia, and colonic muscle spasms. These effects are due to its ability to relax the smooth muscles. Once the smooth muscles surrounding the intestine are relaxed, there is less chance of spasm and the indigestion that goes along with spasm. The menthol naturally in peppermint is thought to be a key reason for this bowl-comforting effect. To get the benefits of peppermint, try a cup of fresh peppermint tea, you can also add fresh peppermint leaves to stir-fries and curries, and salads. It is available in supplement form. Recommendation: Peopgest by Nature's Way (www.naturesway.com)

Honey - can treat skin burns (prevent infections) and soothe a sore throat and cough. Honey has been used topically as an antiseptic therapeutic agent for the treatment of ulcers, burns and wounds for centuries. One study compared the wound healing effects of honey to a conventional treatment (silver sulfadiazene) in burn patients and after one week of treatment, 91% of honey treated burns were infection-free compared with only 7% receiving the conventional treatment. The honey-treated burns also healed quicker. Honey is composed mainly of glucose and fructose, two sugars that strongly attract water, so honey absorbs water in the wound, drying it out so that the growth of bacteria and fungi is inhibited. Raw honey contains an enzyme called glucose oxidase that, when combined with water, produces hydrogen peroxide, a mild antiseptic. Honey has been shown to be a more effective cough suppressant for children ages 2-18 than DM (common ingredient in cough syrups). A study of 105 children aged 2-18 years with upper respiratory tract infections and night-time coughing, found that a single night-time dose of buckwheat honey was an effective alternative treatment for relief of cough and improved sleep difficulty. *Historical fact: in the time of the ancient Olympics, athletes consumed honey and dried figs to enhance their sports performance. Honey is low GI and helps maintain good blood sugar control. It also contains friendly bacteria: lactobacilli and bifidobacteria. Honey comes in a range of colors (white, amber, red, brown). Its flavor and texture vary with the type of flower nectar from which it was made. The most commonly available honeys are made from clover, alfalfa, heather and acacia flowers; can also be made from thyme and lavender). The darker the color, the deeper the flavor. Look for raw, organic honey as the processing of honey often removes many of the beneficial nutrients. Do not feed honey-containing products to infants under one year of age; honey may contain Clostridium botulinum spores and toxins that can cause infant botulism, a life-threatening paralytic disease. Honey is safe for children older than 12 months and adults.


Milk - if your mother used to give you a cup of warm milk before sending you off to bed, she had the right idea.


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Dairy foods are a good source of tryptophan, an amino acid that your body converts to melatonin and serotonin - both of which help to induce sleep. If you want a snack with your milk, have a food that is mostly carbohydrate with a small amount of protein. A high-carbohydrate, low-protein combination will help increase the availability of tryptophan to your brain, which helps it make more melatonin and serotonin. Examples: oatmeal with milk, granola and yogurt, or an apple with cottage cheese.

Bananas - help combat diarrhea and act as an antacid. Bananas provide one of our best sources of potassium (467 mg of potassium and only 1 mg of sodium). Diarrhea causes depletion of important electrolytes, such as potassium, and in severe cases that can affect heart function. Bananas can replenish your stores of potassium, and they also contain a soluble fibre called pectin that can normalize bowel movements, aiding both diarrhea and constipation. Bananas have long been recognized for their antacid effects that protect against stomach ulcers and ulcer damage. In one study, a simple mixture of banana and milk significantly suppressed acid secretion.

Turmeric - long been used in Chinese and Indian medicine as an anti-inflammatory to treat a wide variety of conditions, including flatulence, menstrual difficulties, toothache, bruises, and colic. The healing properties of turmeric are attributed to curcumin, the yellow/orange pigment of turmeric. In numerous studies, curcumin's anti-inflammatory effects have been shown to be comparable to anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen. Unlike the drugs which cause upset stomach curcumin does not irritate the stomach; it actually can help relieve symptoms of upset stomach, gas, bloating have any toxicity. Turmeric can be added to curries, stews and sauces or taken in supplement form.

Cranberry - popular for its bladder benefits cranberry is now being used to prevent cavities and fight off gum disease. It works by preventing bacteria from sticking to the surface of the gums and teeth. A word of caution: don't consume large quantities of sugar-laden cranberry juice or cranberry sauce to protect your teeth; the sugar in these products is likely to cause not prevent decay. Choose unsweetened organic cranberry juice, mouth rinses made with cranberry, or cranberry chews (by Quest Vitamins).

Clove Oil - contains a compound called eugenol that has anti-inflammatory properties, antiseptic and analgesic properties (helps relieve pain). Clove oil is used topically to relieve gum/dental pain. Studies also show that clove may offer benefits for easing joint pain and inflammation. Historically, clove was used by the Chinese as a breath freshener. To use clove oil, dip a cotton swab or small piece of gauze in the oil and apply to the gum area. Try not to touch it to your tongue as it has a very strong and unpleasant taste.

For more information, please visit: www.sherrytorkos.com and look for Sherry's new book, The Canadian Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine.

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