

The Sweet Healing Qualities of Honey

Comment [HCL1]:

My name, Deborah, means 'honey bee' in Hebrew. As a 'bee' myself, I have always felt a connection with bees.....and honey! Growing up, my family ate apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet new year, but beyond its sweet taste honey has a long history as a healing substance in nearly every culture on the planet. In fact, The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, an Egyptian document from the 17th Century B.C.E. - considered the most ancient of all medical texts - includes the use of honey as the standard anti-septic remedy, listing it as an ingredient in over half of the 900 remedies mentioned. The use of honey as a healing substance is just as applicable, effective and safe in the 21st Century A.C.E, as it was in ancient Egypt, we just have more scientific understanding now as to why.

What is it about honey that makes it medicinal? Honey is a very complex food with a broad range of beneficial components. In addition to small amounts of a wide variety of vitamins, minerals, and amino acids, honey contains the beneficial bacteria Bifidobacteria and Lactobacillus. These probiotics support a healthy gut flora and overall good health. In perfect relation to this, honey also contains Oligosaccharides. These carbohydrates act as pre-biotics in the gut, meaning they enhance the growth of the beneficial bacteria. Honey also has some antioxidant activity, but it is the antibacterial action that is likely the most potent medicinal property. This is generally due to the production of small amounts of hydrogen peroxide. This is the main reason honey is effective in killing a wide variety of bacteria and viruses internally and externally.

Honey quality is of the utmost importance when using it for medicinal purposes. Always buy raw, unprocessed honey to reap the benefits. There are also certain types of honey that are more medicinally active than others. In general, darker honeys have more potent anti-bacterial properties than lighter honeys. Locally in Minnesota, buckwheat honey is a good dark honey choice. I found some at the Fulton Farmer's market at the Beez Kneez Honey stand. I spoke to the owner, Kristy Allen, and she brought my attention to a study in which buckwheat honey was found to be more effective than the cough medicine dextromethorphan in the treatment of nocturnal cough symptoms due to upper respiratory tract infections in children. While there is some disagreement on the use of honey for babies, take note that many doctors do not recommend giving honey to infants under one year of age.

In regard to medicinal quality, a specific honey of note is manuka honey. Unlike honeys containing hydrogen peroxide, the antibacterial effects of manuka honey is due to the phytochemicals it contains. Manuka honey is actually tested and rated for the strength of its antibacterial activity, or Unique Manuka Factor (UMF™). Manuka honey rated UMF 10 or higher is considered the best medicinal honey. Such rating will appear on the label of authentic manuka honey. While excellent for home use, manuka honey is one honey that can be considered hospital-grade. A recent study exemplifies this in its findings that manuka honey not only acted synergistically with the pharmaceutical antibiotic oxacillin in treating methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), but it actually reversed oxacillin resistance in MRSA. In this age of antibiotic resistant bacteria, this finding is significant.

While expanded use in hospitals and in medical prescriptions may be on the horizon, honey has always been an excellent part of a home medicine cabinet. It has an amazing shelf-life, as when stored in optimal conditions it can last for decades, or even centuries! It can be safely used internally and externally. A spoonful alone or mixed into herbal teas and taken as needed will assist in the treatment of upper respiratory tract infections, including colds, coughs and sore throats. The combination of probiotic, prebiotics and anti-bacterial actions make honey an excellent digestive remedy. It can be part of the treatment of many infections of the digestive tract, including *Helicobacter pylori*.

Externally, honey is a perfect first aid dressing, sterilizing infected wounds and promoting healing. It may be applied in the treatment of minor cuts and abrasions, bee stings, minor burns, canker sores, cracked nipples, chilblains, abscesses and chapped skin.

Honey is also useful in the treatment of seasonal allergies. For this purpose, local honey is essential. The closer it was made to home the better. This is because local honey can contain pollen from the offending plant, but in minute, manageable amounts. Over time the effect is similar to that of a series of allergy shots, but much easier to take and far less expensive. Take two teaspoons a day for several months before allergy season to reduce allergic reactions. Local honey may also be dissolved with sea salt in warm water for use in a neti pot for allergic sinus conditions, as well as bacterial or viral sinus infections.

As we become more educated on the amazing healing properties of honey, we must also become aware that honeybees are a threatened species due to the phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), the cause of which is not clear. In CCD, entire colonies of bees suddenly leave the hive and the hive is then finished. Possible contributing factors include pesticide use, viruses, mites, transportation of bee colonies long distances, and extreme weather. Purchasing local honey is one way we can support honeybees as we then support the work of the beekeepers. Other actions we can take include becoming a beekeeper ourselves, not using pesticides on our lawns and gardens, planning bee friendly plants in our yards (such as butterfly weed, basil, clover, daisies, goldenrod, lavender, marigold, and sunflowers), putting out a dish of water for bees, encouraging our politicians to support more honeybee research, not leaving jars of foreign honey outside, learning more about bees, and being a good neighbor to bees by staying calm in their presence. Be a friend to honeybees, as these hard working pollinators and honey makers reward us greatly, not only through making sweet, healing honey, but also through pollination, which is essential for the growth of a large percentage of the food on our entire planet.

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