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The cures in your kitchen cupboards

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Most of us keep the bathroom cabinet stocked with remedies for common ailments - but we could just as well look in our kitchen cupboards instead. Many everyday ingredients can double as home cures for a host of complaints, from toothache to sciatica - and with no worry of side-effects. Here, Angela Epstein rounds up 25 of the best home remedies...

MOUTH ULCERS

Camomile tea can help soothe the pain of mouth ulcers, according to London GP Dr Rob Hicks. Allow the herbal brew to cool with the tea bag in, then swill liquid around the mouth before swallowing. Do this every couple of hours. It is thought the herb contains substances that relieve inflammation.

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URINARY INFECTIONS

To relieve the pain of a urinary tract infection, such as cystitis, mix half a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in an 8oz glass of water and drink, says Dr Jenni Byrom, a gynaecologist at Birmingham Women's Hospital. This changes the pH level of the acidic urine so that it will burn less when passing water. Do this once or twice a day at the first sign of infection.

Drinking a glass of homemade cranberry juice twice a day can also help, she says. Cranberry juice contains chemicals which inhibit the activity of E. coli - the bacteria most often responsible for cystitis. To make the juice, boil fresh or frozen cranberries until soft, liquidise when cool and drink a standard glass. This way you know you are getting the benefit of pure fresh fruit, unlike with a commercial drink which may be diluted and contain added sugar.

ECZEMA

An oatmeal bath can help if you suffer from eczema or dry, itchy skin, says GP Dr Paul Griffiths of the Blemish Clinic in Manchester. This is because oats contain anti-inflammatory compounds known as avenanthramides, which also have an antipruritic (anti-itch) effect.

Fill a piece of muslin or cheesecloth with several tablespoons of oats and then let the water run through this as you fill the bath. Olive oil can also be used to relieve eczema as it contains mild antibacterial agents which may help contain skin outbreaks.

VERRUCA

Taping the inside of the peel from an overripe banana to a verruca may help the healing process, says podiatric surgeon Michael O'Neill.

This is due to the anti-viral properties in the mucilage (the sticky substance inside the peel).

Apply the peel before you go to bed and do this every night until the verruca has gone.

LEG CRAMPS

A glass of tonic water before going to bed can help prevent cramp, says Dr Mike Dixon, visiting professor of integrated health and care at the University of Westminster, London. Tonic water contains naturally occurring quinine (the ingredient that gives it its bitter taste), which prevents

the muscles going into spasm and causing the pain of cramp.

Keep a spoon by your bed, too. If you wake with leg cramp and this makes your leg feel hot, put the spoon on to your limb. The coolness of the metal will draw heat from the body, relieving the cramp.

SCIATICA

The muscular pain caused by sciatica can be relieved by standing against a wall, with a potato placed strategically against the part of the buttocks where the pain originates.

"By pressing against this, the potato acts like a fulcrum on the muscles, providing a pivot over which they can stretch," says Robin Shepherd, acting chairman of the General Osteopathic Council. "This will relieve the muscular tension associated with sciatica."

The sciatic nerve is the largest nerve in the body, running from the spinal cord and down the back of each leg.

"The potato digging into the tender muscles in the buttocks will relieve the pain running down the leg," Mr Shepherd says. For greatest relief, repeat several times every day.

CUTS, GRAZES AND BLISTERS

Manuka honey contains a powerful antiseptic to prevent infection and can be applied in small amounts to treat cuts, grazes and blisters, says Dr Dixon. Use the lowest strength Manuka honey (basic factor 10-15).

Nutritionist Jane Clarke adds that the honey has also been shown to have strong anti-viral properties and taking a teaspoon of Manuka honey twice a day may help speed up recovery after a viral infection.

COLD & FLU SYMPTOMS

Relieve a stuffy nose, ear infection or congestion on the chest by eating something spicy such as a hot curry dish, says Dr Griffiths. This makes the nose and eyes run, loosening the mucus.

Garlic, which is often used in Indian food, helps break down mucus and is antiviral, antifungal, antibacterial and an antioxidant, so will help fight infection and boost the immune system.

BODY ODOUR

Sprinkle a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in your armpits or on your feet, says GP Dr Rob Hicks. A natural antiperspirant, this reduces the amount of moisture normally produced in a day.

HAYFEVER

Cold, wet tea bags wrapped in paper towels can help soothe itchy eyes caused by a cold or hayfever, says Manchester-based GP Dr Charles Simenoff. It is thought the tannic acid in tea can help reduce the itch.

Smearing Vaseline up each nostril can also help, says Dr Dixon. The pollen catches on the sticky jelly, preventing it from travelling further up the nose and triggering an allergic reaction. Remove the Vaseline every two hours with a tissue, and then repeat the process.

NAUSEA

Ginger can help, because compounds in the spice have anti-sickness properties.

A study involving Danish naval cadets found that taking just 1g of powdered ginger before embarkation reduced symptoms of seasickness - including dizziness - by almost 40 per cent,

and slashed the frequency of vomiting by more than 70 per cent.

It's also good for morning sickness. According to Dr Hicks, pregnant women may get greater benefit from eating ginger biscuits. These have the added benefit over powdered ginger of helping to maintain blood sugar levels, and nausea is often caused by low blood sugar.

ARTHRITIS

To ease the joint pains caused by arthritis, mix one dessertspoon of honey with one dessertspoon of cider vinegar and take with breakfast, says Dr Dixon. Both ingredients are natural anti-inflammatories.

INGROWN TOE NAIL

Draw out the infection from a septic ingrown toe nail by making a poultice from bread mashed in milk, suggests Michael O'Neill. Apply it to the toe with cling film and leave it on for at least 20 minutes. Repeat this until the pus begins to come out. "The heat of the warmed milk widens the blood vessels and draws the infection to the surface," says Mr O'Neill.

DISCOLOURED TEETH

Prevent discolouration of the teeth by having a piece of sugarless gum after drinking tea or coffee, says dentist Dr Phil Stemmer of the Teeth For Life Clinic in London. Chewing gum causes an increase in the production of saliva, which will help to wash away such liquids before they have a chance to stain your teeth.

SPLINTERS

To remove a splinter, take a piece of sticky tape, press on the area firmly and then remove by pulling from the opposite direction to the way the splinter is embedded, advises GP Rob Hicks. The splinter should come out on the tape.

HEADACHE

At the first sign of a headache, have a cup of tea, suggests nutritionist Jane Clarke. "Headaches are caused by changes in the blood vessels: they either contract or expand. A small dose of caffeine seems to reverse these changes."

EAR WAX

Soften ear wax by applying a few drops of olive oil into the ear four times a day, advises Dr Byrom. "This is as effective as anything you can buy over the counter for ear wax."

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Take a clove of raw garlic and apply to the affected area. Active chemical compounds known as ajoenes in the garlic act as potent antifungals and may stop the growth of a range of common fungal infections, including thrush and athlete's foot.

Mr O'Neill adds that mixed to a paste and applied between the toes and on the sole, bicarbonate of soda can also help prevent athlete's foot.

WARTS

Soak an infected hand or foot in diluted vinegar to get rid of unsightly warts, advises Sheffield-based GP and orthopaedic physician Dr Rav Naik. "The acid in vinegar will destroy the viral particles in the wart," he says. Soak for at least 15 minutes every day and repeat until warts clear.

TOOTHACHE

You can get swift relief from toothache by dipping a cotton bud in oil of cloves and applying it directly on to the area, says dentist Dr Philip Stemmer.

Cloves have natural pain-killing properties. Indeed, doctors in Germany have recently devised a quick-acting anaesthetic based on the plant.

Be careful, though, not to leave the cotton bud on for more than a couple of minutes as it can cause irritation to the gums. You can buy oil of cloves from health food shops.

WASP STINGS

Treat a wasp sting by rubbing with a slice of onion, says Dr Simenoff. This will reduce the swelling and pain and speed up the recovery time. There are enzymes in fresh-cut onion that help break down the compounds in a sting that cause inflammation.

UPPER BACK PAIN

To relieve upper back pain, place a rolling pin on the floor and lie on top of it so that it runs across the back, positioned between your shoulder blades, and forms a T-shape with your spine, says osteopath Robin Shepherd.

"By rolling the body over it up and down, this will arch the spine and so relieve the tension in the muscles which causes back pain."

- *Always contact your GP if the problem persists.*

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