

Nature's cure-all. (aloe vera)(includes related article on information sources)

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Aloe vera appears to be an all-around herbal cure for many ailments. These range from burns, insect bites and rashes to medical applications as eyedrops, toothpaste and anti-inflammatory agents.

It's time to take a closer look at aloe vera.

Ouch - get the aloe! If you've ever burned yourself while cooking, barbecuing, ironing, or stoking a fire, you may be familiar with the soothing qualities of the aloe plant. But you may not be aware of its wider medicinal properties. The gel of this succulent perennial herb - which eases the pain of minor burns and such other skin irritations as sunburn, insect bites, and rashes caused by poison ivy and poison oak - has also been found to accelerate the body's entire healing process, relieving ailments ranging from allergies to digestive disorders. No wonder the aloe plant sitting on the kitchen windowsill has served as a favorite home remedy for centuries.

Aloe vera has amassed its share of folklore over the millennia. Egyptian wall carvings from the fourth millennium B.C. depict it as "the plant of immortality": Apparently it numbered among the traditional funerary gifts for the Pharaohs. The Egyptian Book of Remedies, which dates to around 1500 B.C., describes aloe's value as a skin tonic and also as a laxative when combined with other herbs. Dioscorides, a Greek physician and pharmacologist who traveled with the Roman armies serving under the emperor Nero nearly 2,000 years ago, recorded aloe's healing properties in his *De materia medica*, the standard Western medical text until the Renaissance. He recommended the use of aloe gel to heal skin blemishes, treat wounds, cure hemorrhoids - even stop hair loss. And the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder, writing in A.D. 77, again credited aloe principally for its laxative qualities.

Ninety-Nine Percent Water

Native to Africa, the 325-odd species of aloe are members of the lily family, which makes asparagus, garlic, and onion aloe relatives. The word aloe derives from ancient Greek and means "bitter," in reference to its taste. In the 16th century the Spaniards carried aloe to the New World, where it was used internally to treat stomach ailments and topically to soothe cuts and burns, especially sunburn.

Today aloe is widely cultivated throughout the world. Most U.S. aloe farms are found in Texas, California, Arizona, and Florida, where Aloe vera - sometimes taxonomically listed as *A. barbadensis* 'Miller' - is the most common variety grown for commercial production.

Ninety-nine percent of the aloe plant is composed of water. Its healing properties are found in the other "one percent."

Aloe's first-aid effect seals wounds on the skin very much as the leaf seals itself when it has been cut: A fresh-cut aloe leaf will begin to heal itself within minutes, preventing air from drying it out. Medical researchers have found that aloe contains a type of long-chain sugar molecule called a mucopolysaccharide, which is what gives aloe its muciliginous qualities. When applied to burns, aloe interjects this sugary substance into the cell membranes and makes them more permeable. It works much the same way when the gel is taken internally, whether in the form of juices or concentrates from which the harsh laxatives aloin and aloe emodin have been removed.

Anecdote or Wonder Drug?

Users of aloe vera widely report that its healing benefits, though easily experienced, are not easily explained. Many contend that aloe is an all-purpose "miracle" plant. Maryanne Ibarra, for instance, a registered nurse and naturopath in San Diego, Calif., began merchandising her own line of aloe vera products, Aloe Complete, after working in the health-food industry for 27 years. "Never have I heard so many positive things about any one herb or nutritional supplement as I have about drinking aloe vera juice - it's your basic friendly food," declares Ms. Ibarra.

"For the most part," she says, "clients feel that drinking the juice gives them sustained energy, not simply an adrenaline rush."

Although scientific proof of and research into all of aloe's claims remain in their early stages, evidence of aloe vera's healing qualities is mounting. Patients assert that drinking aloe juice has helped them to heal themselves of Crohn's disease (an extensive and chronic inflammation of the digestive tract), arthritis, constipation, Epstein-Barr, and digestive dysfunctions.

Recent uses of aloe vera in the medical profession include the medical branches of optometry (there are aloe eyedrops), dentistry (aloe toothpaste helps inhibit the growth of plaque), dermatology (aloe ranks high as an anti-inflammatory agent), gastroenterology, and perhaps the most recent and exciting area: the study of immuno-depressive disorders, wherein medical science is utilizing aloe vera for the treatment of the immune system when it is no longer functioning at its optimum capacity.

Gene Hale, managing director of the International Aloe Science Council in Irving, Tex., a nonprofit professional organization devoted to aloe research, has been drinking aloe juice for 16 years. He says that drinking aloe vera has given him increased energy and notes that he hasn't had a cold in seven years. His organization maintains a working relationship with the Food and Drug Administration and keeps tabs on the latest approval status of the medicinal effects of aloe. (To date the FDA has only approved aloe for research purposes.)

Regardless of scientific claims, manufacturers of aloe cite record-breaking sales. And some cosmetic companies are known to use minimal amounts of aloe derivatives in their

products simply because "aloe sells."

Aloe Power

Dr. John C. Pittman, founder and medical director of the Carolina Center for Bio-Oxidative Medicine in Raleigh, N.C., became intrigued with the power of aloe vera when he was working in a hospital emergency room. One morning a patient came in with burns on her hands, the result of a cooking accident. The hospital at that time was conducting a study of aloe vera, so Dr. Pittman asked the burn victim if he could dress her right hand with the traditional treatment of the antibiotic cream Silvadene while dressing the left with a purified form of liquid aloe vera concentrate. She agreed. That evening the patient returned to the hospital and demanded that he put whatever he had put on her left hand on her right. She told Dr. Pittman that her right hand was still throbbing with pain, while her left hand had no pain whatsoever. To his surprise, while redressing the wounds he found that redness, swelling, and pain were greatly reduced on the aloe-treated hand but not on the one that he had treated with Silvadene.

Dr. Pittman helps his patients design individual and family wellness programs that combine the best of both allopathic and complementary medicines. "In 1994," says Dr. Pittman, "the state of North Carolina opened the door to the legal practice of holistic health care by a medical physician when it added a statute to its laws giving physicians the right to explore all types of treatment in order to best serve their patients. That made my center possible." Now Dr. Pittman prescribes aloe vera juice for patients who suffer from immuno-depressive conditions like the Epstein-Barr virus, chronic fatigue syndrome, AIDS, and systemic candidiasis.

Leaky Gut Syndrome

Dr. Pittman has found that most immuno-depressive conditions have one common symptom: a high incidence of digestive dysfunction and poor digestion. "Food allergies - especially to dairy - are a major source of digestive dysfunction," remarks Dr. Pittman.

Poor digestion happens when foods are not being broken down properly and are not being used to help the body regenerate itself. The intestines then become inflamed as the intestinal lining reacts by swelling. Increased intestinal permeability develops as partially digested food particles are released into the bloodstream. Alternative health practitioners call this "leaky gut syndrome." Once in circulation, the body reacts to these particles as though they were foreign and alerts the immune system to attack them by building up antibodies. After a lengthy fight the immune system enters into a chronic hyperimmune state. "The immune system becomes so overworked," says Dr. Pittman, "that it is similar to a draining battery."

This hyperimmune state can lead to rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and connective tissue disorders. "In addition to a worn-out immune system," comments Dr. Pittman, "food remnants provide fuel for the overgrowth of fermentative fungal organisms such as *Candida albicans* and various types of parasites." *Candida* in turn can worsen food allergies, create hypoglycemia and digestive disturbances, and cause bloating, flatulence, skin rashes, and extreme fatigue, all of which can further damage the immune system.

Drinking aloe vera juice helps to seal the intestinal wall much in the same way aloe gel seals a wound or soothes a burn when applied to the skin.

"Aloe effectively heals the lining of the intestines," says Dr. Pittman. "It fixes the damaged membranes, intestinal swelling decreases, and the cells of the intestinal wall are tightened, which basically corrects intestinal weakness. The continual flow of protein to the blood is also stopped." In addition to prescribing aloe to his patients with leaky gut syndrome, Dr. Pittman suggests a modified juice fast for from three to 10 days. This puts the GI tract to a well-needed rest.

"Unfortunately, most people do not realize they even have leaky gut syndrome," says Dr. Pittman, "until one day they have organ system failure and just collapse." He suggests that patients take notice of their health and pay particular attention to any long-term or recurring infections that could indicate an immune system failure. Dr. Pittman also recommends that his patients have a comprehensive stool study done. This enables him to know all of the aspects of patients' digestion and whether they could be suffering from bacterial, yeast, or parasitic infections.

Aloe Availability

Aloe products are available in gel, juice, and concentrate forms and can be found at health-food stores locally. Gels are applied topically and usually run from about \$5 to \$6 for a 16-ounce container. Juices and concentrates are consumed and can be mixed with water or juice. A quart of juice costs anywhere from \$7 to \$15, while concentrates run from \$20 to \$30 depending on potency and product type. It's wise to consult a health practitioner to determine optimal dosages, which vary. However, for general well-being, aloe advocates generally recommend drinking a teaspoonful in the morning and another in the evening, too. Producing juice from your own fresh aloe is not recommended, as the leaves contain aloin and aloe emodin. These harsh, undesirable laxatives are removed from preparations available at health-food stores.

Growing Aloe at Home

By all means, continue to keep a pot of aloe growing on your kitchen windowsill. A hardy plant that requires minimal care, it can survive temperatures of 40 [degrees] F and can easily be grown in a container indoors all year long. Aloe prefers plenty of sunlight but survives in light shade as well. To use a fresh aloe leaf to treat a burn, for instance, simply cut one of the outermost leaves (the plant grows new leaves from the center outward) and apply the sticky gel to the afflicted area.

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Membership to the International Aloe Science Council costs \$50 per year and includes a subscription to the monthly Inside Aloe. Write or call them at 415 East Airport Freeway, Suite 365, Irving, TX 75062; (214) 258-8772.

The Carolina Center for Bio-Oxidative Medicine can be reached at 4505 Fair Meadow Lane, Suite 111, Raleigh, NC 27607; (800) 473-9812.