

Old Wives' Tales: Modern Miracles— Turmeric as Traditional Medicine in India

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Misery never comes alone. In hospital emergency room services it is commonly believed that trauma, serious cases, come in threes. So used to be the case of very hot summers in Northern India where I grew up as a child. As if the temperatures over 130 F by 11 AM were not enough, the scalding hot days were coupled with severe, epidemic proportions of itching skin infections, cholera, smallpox and eye infections.

The pink eye was a common visitor each summer. The eyes caught the infection; they itched and were producing white, foul-smelling, thick, and cottage cheese-like discharge faster than the production line of stamp-canceling machines in the post offices.

Rural areas in our part of India had no doctors. There were no known antibiotic ointments available to cure this contagious eye disease. The simple task of opening the eyes brought excruciating pain, as if someone put a handful of sand on the eyeball and started grinding it. If we did fall asleep in spite of this pain, within hours the pain used to wake us up, usually with our eyes glued shut with the discharge in the eyes.

The only folk remedy was washing the infected eyes with the milk from new mother's breasts, squirted directly in the eyes. It probably washed away the offending bugs and brought some

relief. Occasionally, the village elders used to go out and bring a weed growing commonly in the area. Application of the milk or the juice from this weed used to provide some relief.

The most effective treatment and prevention used universally was *haldi*, a root-type of tuber commonly called "turmeric" in English. We all used handkerchiefs soaked in fresh ground turmeric to wipe our eyes, and a poultice of turmeric paste was applied on the eyelids.

The botanical name for turmeric is *Curcuma longa*. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian medical system, has used turmeric for centuries to cure various infections and to boost the immune system. A poultice of freshly-made turmeric paste is applied to cuts, abrasions and infected areas. The post-partum ladies, for a couple of weeks after delivering their babies, always get a fresh paste of turmeric with powder of dried ginger roots, and honey if available, mixed in a glass of hot milk twice a day to drink. The villagers do not know why it is healthy, but every new mother gets this tonic drink in our area. The poultice of turmeric is also applied to the perineum, which helps the healing of any lacerations in the birth canal.

There is a common folklore in our area that withholding turmeric from the daily diet makes people get infections that might kill them.

Turmeric is a major ingredient in Indian cooking. Recent studies have shown that curcumin, the chemical responsible for turmeric's yellow color, curcumin, stops the growth of the deadliest form of skin cancer, melanoma (Siwak, D., Curcumin-induced antiproliferative and proapoptotic effects in melanoma cells are associated with suppression of IkappaB kinase and nuclear factor kappaB activity and are independent of the B-Raf/mitogen-activated/extracellular signal-regulated protein kinase pathway and the Akt pathway, *Cancer*, August 15, 2005, Volume 104).

More research is needed to find out the mode of action of turmeric in its immune boosting property, its anti-cancer and antibiotic properties. There is also a need to educate the public and find ways to include turmeric in our daily diet.

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