

An Ayurvedic basis for using honey to treat herpes

Comment to:

Topical honey application vs. acyclovir for the treatment of the recurrent herpes simplex lesions

Noorie S. Al-Walli

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Dear Editor,

Honey was demonstrated to accelerate the healing process of labial and genital herpes lesions with marked improvement in the signs and symptoms of recurrent episodes [1]. This article is an interesting example of the use of the topical application of honey in a viral infection. There are several references to the use of sugar based preparations in traditional medicine, including the Indian system of Ayurveda [2].

Ayurveda is a compound word i.e., *āyus* meaning 'life' or 'life principle', and the word *veda*, which refers to 'a system of knowledge'. Hence 'Ayurveda' roughly translates as the 'knowledge of life'. The ancient Indian ayurveda texts, *Caraka Samhita* [circa 200 B.C.] and *Susrutha Samhita* [circa 1200–800 B.C.] describe the separate use of honey and sugar in most ayurvedic preparations, where both of them are used to expel harmful substances from the body [3]. In *Susrutha Samhita* eight types of honey have been described largely based on the nature of the insect which gathered them, as well as the properties of the honey [4].

In ayurvedic medicine it is considered that the body consists of three physical humors [*doshas*] viz, wind [*vata*], bile [*pitta*] and phlegm [*kapha*] [5]. Harmony between the three physical humors [*doshas*] and three mental attributes [*gunas*] leads to health, whereas disharmony is associated with disease [6]. The three mental attributes [*gunas*] are divine [*sattva*], kingly [*rajas*] and evil [*tamas*].

Also, imbalance within any one of the three physical *doshas* i.e., *vata*, *pitta* or *kapha*, leads to dysfunction, imbalance and disease, specific to the humor involved [7]. Many disorders have been described as being associated with *pitta* imbalance including pyrexia, hyperacidity, abscesses, stomatitis, aphthous ulcers, and even herpes (described as a condition with painful vesicles) (*Caraka Samhita*, Chapter 11; Verse 14) [8]. *Pitta* imbalance is also associated with specific symptoms and signs viz, burning, itching, heat, redness and discharge, among others (*Caraka Samhita*, Chapter 11; Verse 15) [8].

Honey is one of the remedies recommended to alleviate disorders of *pitta* (*Caraka Samhita*, Chapter 27; Verses 243–246) [8]. Since *pitta* imbalance is associated with herpes, this suggests that in ayurvedic medicine there is a basis for the use of honey in the treatment of herpes. While there are no published trials on the use of ayurveda in the management of herpes simplex and other conditions related to *pitta* imbalance, honey is used in the treatment of some of these conditions. For example, honey is effectively used as an adjunct to gargles for aphthous ulcers, stomatitis, and a sore throat [9]. Hence it is worth investigating the use of honey in conditions described as being due to *pitta* imbalance.

Sincerely,

Shirley Telles¹, Raghuraj Puthige²,
Naveen Kalkuni Visweswaraiah³

¹ Patanjali Yog Peeth, Haridwar, Uttaranchal, India;
e-mail: pyp.research@gmail.com

² JSS Institute of Naturopathy & Yogic Sciences,
Ootacamund, Tamil Nadu, India
e-mail: raghurajp@yahoo.com

³ Patanjali Yog Peeth, Haridwar, Uttaranchal, India

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