

## 8 Must-Try Herbal Remedies That Actually Work

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Disclaimer: The writer is not a physician. Please do not mistake this article for medical advice, for which we recommend seeing a licensed physician.

My wife (Mrs. Cache) is Brazilian, the youngest of her father's 18 children. Three of her grandparents are indigenous Brazilians. Her mother was from the Tabajara (which translates loosely to "Lord of the Village") tribe and her father, who is about to turn 97, is from the Potiguara (which translates to the "Shrimp Eaters" or "People Who Eat Shrimp") tribe. Both of her parents were born in indigenous lands (or what we used to call Indian reservations in the USA) in the state of Paraíba, in northeast Brazil.

Her mother saw city lights for the first time when she rode into town from indigenous lands in the pannier of a donkey in the 1940's. She was frightened by seeing the city lights at night. Even after moving to town, they continued to live simply. Her mother's first home was constructed of palm fronds, and even today, the homes do not have glass windows or hot running water, and some of the family still cooks on a wood stove. As often happens when one culture is absorbed by another, her parents lost much of their native language and cultural memory as they stopped identifying as "indigenous" and began to identify simply as Brazilians.

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Something that endured, however, was the tradition of using herbal and home remedies. Money was tight and good medical care was not always available. My wife was taught many home remedies by her parents and grandparents, especially the use of teas and effusions.

As her parents did not have much formal education, the home did not possess a large library, but one of her father's prized possessions was a series of books on herbal medicines. Thanks to that purchase and a European ancestor or two, the family's repertoire of home remedies includes plants with native ranges outside South America.

I suspect that had my wife's grandparents remained in indigenous lands, they would have had access to the greater specialized knowledge of curandeiros, which translates roughly to "medicine man" or "shamans." Still, in many cases, I have been able to find modern medical studies supporting many of the uses.

### 1. Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*)

Fennel tea is taken as a sedative. In high concentrations it is an antispasmodic. It is also taken for digestive health as it stimulates gastrointestinal motility. The medicinal part of the plant is the oil extracted from the ripe fruit. The dried, ripe fruit is also used as a spice. Experimentally, fennel oil in vitro, is antimicrobial, which lends credibility to its use as an antiseptic poultice. (Gruenwald, PhD, Brendler, BA, & Jaenicke, MD, 1998)

### 2. Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile* & *Matricaria chamomilla*)

Several daisy look-alike species of the family Asteraceae are commonly known as chamomile. Tea made from *Chamaemelum nobile* or *Matricaria chamomilla* is a mild sedative. It is taken at bedtime as a sleep aid. It likely also relieves itching when applied externally. Studies on animals suggest that components of chamomile oil also soothe burned or irritated skin.

Because chamomile has multiple uses, it has been used for “anything that ails” a person for centuries and is an ingredient in dozens of cures, especially in Europe where it is prescribed for everything from acne to ulcers. (White, M.D. & Foster, 1998) If you desire something stronger than a bag of chamomile tea, brew a tablespoon of flowerheads per cup of water.

Chamomile tincture is taken in doses of 10 to 20 drops in water 3-4 times a day for nervousness, indigestions and menstrual cramps. Chamomile lotion is used on irritated skin. Ointments and creams containing chamomile are used for wounds and diaper rash. And a German study demonstrated that steam inhalation with chamomile extract eases common cold symptoms.

In rare cases, chamomile tea brewed with flowerheads can provoke an allergic reaction. (Michaud, Henry, Becker, Castleman, & Hoffman, 1994)

### 3. Lemon Balm (*Melisa officinalis*)

Used as both a tea and an essential oil for stress and anxiety. It grows in Brazil and Brazilians believe the plant to have sedative, antispasmodic, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory properties and water containing lemon balm extract is sold in pharmacies in Germany. Throughout history, it has also been companion planted to attract bees and other pollinators to gardens. (Wikipedia, 2025)

A member of the mint family, lemon balm is also used for flavoring foods, especially deserts. One of its cultivars is also the source of citronella oil, which is used to repel mosquitoes.

### 4. Elderberry, Black Elder (*Sambucus canadensis*, *S. nigra*)

*Sambucus nigra* is also grown and used in Brazil. My wife’s family uses black elder tea as a cough suppressant, to produce sweating, and for fevers. The dried or cooked ripe fruit and flowers are used in teas, tablets, capsules, tinctures and combination products and are safe to use, but the fresh flowers, raw and unripe fruit can cause adverse reactions.

Elderberry is a diaphoretic (causes sweating) and increases bronchial secretion. It has been used as a home remedy antipyretic (fever reducer), but I have yet to find medical studies on the use of black elder for this or other uses. (Barone, et al., 1990)

To prepare an infusion, 2 teaspoonfuls of dried elder flowers are brewed with 150 ml of simmering

water and strained after 5 minutes. One to two cups can be given (as hot as possible) several times daily, especially in the evening. (Gruenwald, PhD, Brendler, BA, & Jaenicke, MD, 1998)

#### 5. Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

I would be remiss if I left out witch hazel because it is the one herbal remedy that I carry with me every day. It is one of the herbal remedies often recommended by medical doctors. (Michaud, Henry, Becker, Castleman, & Hoffman, 1994)

Extract is distilled from bark. Leaves are also collected in autumn and dried. Fresh bark is also used. Witch hazel extract is an astringent, topical anti-inflammatory, and is locally hemostatic, meaning that it stops bleeding. Witch hazel is used externally as a solution, in poultices, extract preparations, decoctions, ointments and gels, and as suppositories. It is also the principal ingredient in Tuck's hemorrhoids pads. It is used to treat minor wounds, minor burns, inflammation in the skin, venous conditions, inflammation of the mouth and pharynx, and hemorrhoids. (Gruenwald, PhD, Brendler, BA, & Jaenicke, MD, 1998)

Witch hazel also dries out mosquito bites and other weeping insect bites and stops the itching caused by arthropod bites. I learned this in Brazil after I ran out of everything else to put on them and now it is my "go to" treatment for bug bites and minor scrapes and bruises. It is great for treating the constant skin irritations and scratches of toddlers because it is instantly soothing and doesn't sting.

For this reason, I carry a 3ml dropper bottle of it in my pocket and a 6ml bottle in our baby bag and refill them as necessary. If you only carry one or two topical medications, white petrolatum and witch hazel aren't bad choices. Together, they can treat a multitude of minor skin irritations, scratches, wounds and burns.

#### 6. Boldo (*Peumus boldus*)

My wife knows this a Chilean boldo tea, and in her family, it is used for stomach and liver problems as well as pain associated with the gall bladder. The plant is indeed native to Chile and it has been shown to be an antispasmodic, a choleric (increases the secretion of bile and solids from the liver, helping the body to process toxins by acting as a laxative and helps tissue detoxify).

Boldo tea is taken for liver and gallbladder complaints, loss of appetite, dyspepsia (heartburn), and mild spastic gastrointestinal complaints. It should not be taken by patients with a bile duct obstruction or severe liver disease. Patients with gallstones should consult a physician before using boldo tea.

While bold tea is safe at therapeutic dosages, the volatile oil of *Peumus boldus* should not be used as it contains up to 40% ascaridole, which is a toxin that can cause signs of paralysis, hallucinations, depression and partial motor aphasia in patients that consume too much boldo for long periods of time (months). (Gruenwald, PhD, Brendler, BA, & Jaenicke, MD, 1998)

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## 7. Horsetail (*Equisetum* spp.)

Horsetail tea is a diuretic, so it can lower blood pressure, help remove salt from your body and all the other things that diuretics do in addition to increasing frequency of urination. It can be taken for infections of urinary tract, kidney and bladder stones, and post traumatic and static edema. It is used in folk medicine for many other things, but many of these uses are not proven. Horsetail tea should not be used by patients with edema caused by impaired heart or kidney function. (Gruenwald, PhD, Brendler, BA, & Jaenicke, MD, 1998) (White, M.D. & Foster, 1998)

## 8. Honey & Lemon Juice

This was going to be "7 Favorite Natural Remedies" but our toddler just woke up at 3am with a sore throat. He's too young for over-the-counter sore throat medication, so we fire up the humidifier and give him honey with lemon and children's Tylenol. Books on home remedies also suggest chamomile tea, zinc lozenges, sipping anything hot and swapping out your toothbrush. (Barone, et al., 1990)

If the sore throat may be caused by strep, see your physician. You may need antibiotics.

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