

Exploring the uses of traditional medicines: Knowledge shared by First Peoples

Medicine is all around us. Since time immemorial Indigenous peoples in Canada have been using plants and other natural materials as medicine. Traditional healing refers to the health practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs that incorporate First Nations healing and wellness. These practices include using ceremonies, plant, animal or mineral-based medicines, energetic therapies and physical or hands-on techniques.

Plant medicines are used more frequently than those derived from animals, to treat a variety of ailments and conditions. For Indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere in the world the line between food and medicine is blurred. There is a notable overlap between plant species that are edible and those with recognized medicinal qualities. It is also understood that language is integrally linked to indigenous knowledge and practices. While First Peoples don't traditionally use the Eurocentrically common and/or IUPAC chemical names, they have always understood the properties of the plant.

In many Indigenous communities, there are recognized specialists trained in traditional medicine, specific methods of harvesting and preparation of medicines, and their practice often reflects spiritual aspects of healing as well as physical outcomes. Medicinal plants are treated with great reverence and respect, in acknowledgement of their gifts and service to people. Because medicine is often sacred, it is important to check with local Elders in our local First Nation's communities to better understand the proper protocols and approaches (including harvesting) of traditional medicines.

References & Resources:

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/health-system/traditional-wellness-and-healing>

https://www.fnha.ca/WellnessSite/Documents/Traditional_Medicine_web.pdf

<https://indigenizinglearning.educ.ubc.ca/content/traditional-medicines/>

http://iportal.usask.ca/index.php?sid=430525486&cat=153&t=sub_pages

Gray, B. (2015). A Field Guide to Medicinal Wild Plants of Canada. Harbour Publishing.

Examples of local plants with known medicinal properties:



Cattails

The root can be applied to burns and skin infections.



Stinging nettles

It can be used to stop nose bleeds or internal hemorrhaging. When someone was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, the stem would be used to whip the spot on the hand where the pain was to encourage blood flow.



Plantain

If you crush the plantain and wrap it onto cuts, it will act as a disinfectant. It also helps to stop bleeding. This will help with bug bites and skin conditions such as psoriasis and eczema. If you get a rash from the stinging nettle, chew the plantain and put it on the rash.



Creeping juniper

This plant can be dried and used in a tea to treat back pain.



Yarrow

Leaves chewed for colds and coughs; leaves or roots used as a poultice for sores, cuts (said to stop bleeding), abscesses, burns, boils, skin rashes, bronchitis and coughs.



Pineapple weed (chamomile)

Consumed as a tea, it can help with insomnia.



Fleabane

Steeped as a tea, it can be applied to get rid of red, itchy, sore eyes.



Wild ginger

Used externally, as bathing solutions and poultices for headaches and body pains, cramps, infections and boils. Also used as infusions taken internally for convulsions, headaches, fevers, measles, colds, and coughs.