

Indigenous Skin Healing

By Muskaan Sachdeva

Indigenous skin healing is a holistic process and consists of traditional remedies that have been passed down from several generations. The management of skin infections is not solely limited to individual knowledge; rather, there is a strong emphasis on sharing and learning this medicinal knowledge within the entire community. Knowledge is often passed down from Elders and becomes common knowledge through generations. Skin healing within Indigenous communities typically uses traditional medicines made from various herbs, plants, and flowers that are found in nature. Often times, these therapies do not solely represent a medicinal use, but the preparation and application of these remedies are very much symbolic and are ingrained within the culture and way of living for Indigenous peoples.

Aboriginal traditional healing is still widely used today within many different aboriginal cultures in Canada. Many traditional healers are the elders of a tribe who strongly believe in sacred herbs. For the past centuries, Indigenous communities have used honey for example as a form of treatment for wounds, skin infections, burns, and skin ulcers. Honey is a combination of various sugars which include fructose, sucrose, glucose, and water, it is known for its high viscous properties. With such properties, the honey absorbs fluids from wounds and pores while allowing for wounds to heal in a moist environment. Honey is anti-bacterial, anti-inflammatory and anti-fungal which helps stimulate the growth of tissues and reduces edema, inflammation, and pain. Moreover, the concentration of honey is proportional to its anti-bacterial activity. Therefore, the higher the concentration of honey, the better the anti-bacterial properties. Several clinical trialsⁱ have been conducted to test the efficacy of honey in wound management. From these clinical trials, it suggested that honey showed better healing rates compared to other forms of medical treatments such as silver sulfadiazine in superficial and partial thickness burns.

The availability of flora and fauna surrounding Indigenous settlements have allowed for dermatological use of traditional plant-based medicines in native communities around the world. In the Métis Nation of Southern Ontario, plant-based topical treatments involving plantain (*Plantago major*) leaves or dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) and ingestion of red clover flowers (*Trifolium pratense*) have therapeutic uses for rashes, eczema, and psoriasis as well as anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial effects. Other Indigenous skin healing remedies include the Trembling Aspen and Cattails. The Trembling Aspen, a deciduous native tree, which contains a white powder underneath its bark which may be applied on the skin to protect against ultraviolet radiations and sunburns. Cattails, a wild plant found in lakes, where its root can be applied on the skin to help heal burns and skin infections.

Given the significance of ethnomedicinal plant use in indigenous skin healing practices, efforts to integrate and preserve these traditions have been initiated. Canada's Ministerial Advisory Council on Rural Health was established in 2001 to provide advice to the Minister of Health on the enhancement of Aboriginal and remote community health. The Council acknowledges the rich indigenous heritage of traditional medicine and attempts to integrate it into the Aboriginal health system through three recommendations: collaboration with indigenous partners, establishment of Aboriginal health centres with traditional medicine, and adequate funding of preservation initiatives through Aboriginal organizations. In British Columbia, The First Nations Health Authority has devised the "Transformative Change Accord: First Nations Health Plan" (TCA: FNHP), with 30 health action items devoted to protecting and incorporating traditional healing practices, beliefs, and medicines into BC First Nations Health Services. Companies such as AECOM (Asociación de empresas de la construcción de madric) conduct additional studies on behalf of the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) to determine Indigenous plant use for both skin healing and general medicinal use. This knowledge is coalesced to determine and minimize possible impacts of industrial projects in related areas.

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ⁱ Gupta SS, Singh O, Bhagel PS, Moses S, Shukla S, Mathur RK. Honey dressing versus silver sulfadiazene dressing for wound healing in burn patients: A retrospective study. *J Cutan Aesthet Surg*. 2011;4:183–7.

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