

The Secret of Neem *by Maura B. Thompson*

For centuries, the people of India have utilized the neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) for its variety of medicinal uses. The twigs, leaves and bark of the the neem tree provide so many benefits that the Indian equivalent to the American Food and Drug Administration (FDA) believes that "anything from neem has to be good," according to RO. Larson, a contributor to the book, [Neem, A Tree for Solving Global Problems](#).

Neem's role as a wonder drug is traced as far back as 4,500 years ago. The earliest documentation of neem mentioned the fruit, seeds, oil, leaves, roots and bark for their advantageous medicinal properties. These benefits are listed in the ancient documents Caraka-Samhita and Susruta Samhita, the books at the foundation of the Indian system of natural treatment, ayurveda. Neem has a garlic-like odor, and a bitter taste.

Perhaps neem's most touted advantage is the effect it has upon the skin. Preparations from the leaves or oils of the tree are used as general antiseptics, according to a report of The National Research Council's Ad Hoc Panel of the Board on Science and Technology for International Development.

Due to neem's antibacterial properties, it is effective in fighting most epidermal dysfunctions such as acne, psoriasis and eczema. Ancient ayurvedic practitioners believed high sugar levels in the body caused skin disease; neem's bitter quality was said to counteract the sweetness.

Traditionally, Indians bathed in neem leaves steeped in hot water. Since there has never been a report of the topical application of neem causing an adverse side effect, this is a common procedure to cure skin ailments or allergic reactions.

Neem's function as a fungicide depends on the compounds gedunin and nimbidol in its leaf. It is noted by many observers to relieve athlete's foot, ringworm and yeast-like fungi that can develop internally.

Neem also may provide anti-viral treatment for smallpox, chicken pox and warts--especially when applied directly to the skin. Its effectiveness is due in part to its ability to inhibit a virus from multiplying and spreading.

In India and Africa, people use the twigs of the neem tree as toothbrushes. This practice has apparently influenced current dental products that incorporate neem bark extracts in tooth pastes and mouthwashes.

Neem produces pain-relieving, anti-inflammatory and fever reducing compounds that can aid in the healing of cuts, burns, sprains, earaches and headaches, as well as fevers. Several studies of neem extracts in supressing malaria have been conducted, all supporting its use in treatment.

Scientists at India's Defense Institute of Physiology and Allied Science believe they have found a neem-oil extract that behaves as a spermicide. More research is being conducted in this area because of neem's widespread availability in overpopulated countries unable to afford pricier birth control methods.

The potential of the neem tree is so great as to encompass the treatment of a variety of physical ailments including sexually transmitted disease, blood disorders, heart disease, digestive and nervous disorders, parasites, diabetes and, possibly, cancer.

Even though millions of neem consumers exist in India alone, the pharmacological effects have rarely been studied under controlled environments. Neem has never been reported to have an adverse effect when applied topically or for dental use.

Neem may become toxic if ingested in excessive quantities.

One study of the effects of neem oil on children indicated the development of a disease similar to Reye's syndrome. Although this may have been caused by outside contaminants rather than neem toxins, some observers believe that internal consumption of neem oil should be undertaken with caution until its toxicity level has been determined through further studies.

Though, the FDA has not approved neem extracts as an acceptable compound in medicine, neem is manufactured into many health and beauty care products from the leaves, oils and extracts of the tree. These products include bath powders, soaps, shampoos, creams, powders, extracts, insect repellents, pet care products, toothpastes and mouthwashes.

Domestic health care products that contain neem are not readily available, as yet, in the United States. Imports from India, Japan and Germany currently account for the lion's share of neem

used in the U.S., although there are also a few domestic processors. Local natural products stores, or perhaps a merchant specializing in Indian imports, might be a likely source for neem products. It is important, however, to research the source and company from which you decide to obtain your neem products, says John Conrick, author of Neem-The Ultimate Herb.

Despite all the praise and promise associated with neem, even its proponents are not likely to over-promote it. In ayurveda, it is extremely rare to rely on one element as a cure-all. This is a system based on balance within the body and mind. It is believed, therefore, that overuse of neem would have no beneficial outcomes.

Conrick recommends that personal reaction and tolerance to neem need to be tested at the onset of use. A neem supplementary regimen should begin with small quantities, with the individual evaluating his or her body's reactions. If any unnatural side effects develop, either internally or externally, discontinue use.

Neem is an environmentalist's guilt-free natural product. The neem tree grows in abundance and is quite resilient to surrounding nature. Since it has been transplanted to Africa, the Middle East and South America, it has thrived in even the poorest of soils because of its ability to extract nutrients from the ground. Almost every part of the plant is used, adding to its overall efficiency.

With all neem's offerings branching out to different areas of science, one can hardly dispute the translation of neem's Sanskrit name, sarva roga nivarini--"the curer of all ailments." WF

References:

Conrick, John. Neem-The Ultimate Herb

Literature from Pure Gar

Neem: A Tree For Solving Global Problems, National Academy Press

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