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Benefits From Bees

Sleuthing the medicinal value of honey

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JANE SANDERS ILLUSTRATION

“We have a customer who moved here from Philadelphia and developed terrible allergies. She swears local honey cured her,” says Michael Martin, owner of Rose Garden Center on the Westbank Expressway in Marrero.

“Most of our honey is sold to customers who buy it on a regular basis. It is amazing the number of people who say their allergy symptoms are improved by a daily teaspoon or so. We sell three local honeys – two cases of Adrian’s Honey from Algiers every two weeks, a case of Harvey Honey every eight to 12 days and Busy Bee Honey from Marrero.”

“Honey tastes better than plain old sugar, but after a while I had so much honey, I couldn’t eat it all,” says George Haydel Jr. “I keep my hives tucked away in one of my boat yards where they don’t bother anyone. I call it Harvey Honey.” In addition to Rose Garden Center, Harvey Honey is for sale from Folsom Pharmacy on the West Bank and Haydel’s business, Metro Boating in Harvey.

“It is well known that people with allergies get some sort of help if they use honey from their local area. One customer who lives nearby swears by my honey. Her allergies really flare if she doesn’t take a spoonful everyday.

She says regular store-bought honey just doesn't work. Another customer uses honey on cuts. After shoulder surgery, he smeared it on the wound with some other stuff and doesn't even have a scar. He swears it was the honey," says Haydel.

What is the real skinny on honey? Does local honey really protect against allergies? Does honey kill bacteria and promote wound healing? Do honey-based cough remedies work? Is nature's natural sweetener and energy food less fattening than granulated sugar from Louisiana cane fields? As with religion, testimonials abound and data are slim.

Various medical therapies incorporating honey date back to ancient times, and are rediscovered on a recurring basis in the medical press. According to an article published in 1894 by the American Medical Association, Hippocrates promoted honey as a smear-on wound healer. For centuries, remedies to control coughs incorporated honey. Honey was even a trace ingredient in Hadacol, the Louisiana-born-and-bred 12-percent alcohol concoction promoted by the flamboyant state senator Dudley LeBlanc. In 1950 Hadacol ran an eight-page advertising supplement in the New Orleans Item claiming to "bring new hope to sickly, ailing men and women." The Baptists loved it.

In an effort to load the honey movement with real data, pediatricians in Hershey, Pa., recruited 130 children with acute upper respiratory tract infections. Based on their age and size, the coughing children were randomized to receive one-half-to-two teaspoonfuls of honey or honey-flavored dextromethorphan, the active ingredient in several cough suppressants including Robitussin and NyQuil. Honey outshined dextromethorphan as a nocturnal cough suppressant. Sleep logs showed more sleep for the honey-treated children as well as more restful nights for parents.

How does honey reduce coughing and sooth sore throats? Dark honey in particular contains a higher content of phenolic compounds, which are antioxidants or chemical cleaners in cell metabolism. Honey is also a demulcent that decreases inflammation on contact by soothing inflamed mucosal tissues in the throat. It also increases saliva flow, which has its own antimicrobial properties, and helps wash away infected mucus. When honey comes in contact with a cell at war with some germ, it also can stimulate the release of opium-like chemical messengers that reduce pain sensations.

There are a few caveats as to the use of honey as a cough suppressant for children. First of all, infants and children younger than 1 year old shouldn't be fed honey. Immature immune systems are sometimes unable to handle certain bacterial spores that can occur naturally in honey. Secondly, the perceptions recorded in the study were stronger than true statistical associations. Thirdly, the National Honey Board paid for the research.

Too bad there isn't a National Goose Grease Board. My favorite local cough remedy is goose grease and honey, a back-of-town "fare" that was commonly dispensed in New Orleans until just a decade or so ago to break up chest congestion.

"We haven't sold goose grease and honey since before (Hurricane) Katrina. We can't get the goose grease anymore," says Gerald Pannell, a pharmacist at Walgreens and man about town. "I didn't learn about goose grease and honey in pharmacy school but while working at the old H&W Drugstore at Galvez and Caffin streets. We would mix half goose grease and half honey. You had to warm the jar in a pan of warm water on the stove until it turned liquid. A spoonful twice a day or so was suppose to break up even stubborn chest congestions."

But does local honey really have special health benefits? My local search for answers led to Adrian Juttner, a beekeeper as elusive as those Uptown coyotes. Juttner was baptized Catholic, sings in a Touro Synagogue choir and performs with a German band during Oktoberfest celebrations. He runs a tree service and tends to his bees when he isn't killing Formosan termites with a homemade fungus and water concoction.

"I don't know. I sell honey. I don't make claims about it, but I put it on my cereal regularly," said Juttner when I finally pinned him down for a direct answer on the phone one early morning. He was eating breakfast cereal doused with a dose of honey from his 40 hives, which are "scattered all over hell," mostly in Algiers, Abita Springs, Hammond and Plaquemines Parish.

That may indicate one more less medicinal but nevertheless relevant advantage to honey. It tastes good.

A disclosure: the author is an amateur beekeeper whose “Honey from the Hood” is made by bees hived in Central City. It isn’t commercially available but can be sampled at Dominique’s on Magazine in a cheesecake on the menu or chewed in its natural comb with the cheese plate.

Honey – the gumbo of sweeteners.

Refined and granulated sugar processed by man is essentially sucrose. On the other hand, honey made by bees is a complex biological gel of five different sugars – mostly fructose and dextrose with smaller amounts of galactose, maltose and sucrose. Honey also contains trace amounts of 10 essential minerals and seven natural vitamins compared to granulated sugar with only trace amounts of six minerals and one vitamin.

Source: www.nal.usda.gov

Green Honey Glow Mask

(to promote tight, glowing skin)

4 cups fresh spinach
1 cup fresh mint
3 Tablespoons honey
1-inch piece of ginger
 root, peeled
1 ripe banana
2 egg whites

Combine spinach, mint and ginger in a food processor to liquid consistency. Add egg whites and mix thoroughly.

Transfer to a porcelain or a glass bowl. Cover entire face and neck using fingertips with about half of the mixture and leave on for 15-20 minutes. Rinse and apply a moisturizer. Will keep, covered in a refrigerator, for about a week.

Source: *The National Honey Board*