

Education News



NUTRIGOLD[®]

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CASTOR OIL PACKING

A powerful naturopathic technique

Castor oil (*Ricinis Communis*) has been used in over 50 countries around the world for many centuries, both orally and topically. Despite this extensive heritage, the exact mechanisms of its actions have only recently become known, and research continues into its therapeutic activity.

As part of the naturopathic nutritional approach to health and wellbeing castor oil is a valuable tool for managing inflammation and supporting detoxification – two of the most vital steps to optimising vitality. So which conditions will benefit from the use of castor oil? How exactly does it work? And is it safe?

Castor oil is native to India where it has a long tradition of use in Ayurveda, the Indian system of medicine, as an anti-inflammatory and circulatory remedy.¹ It is said to have the property of 'hotness' and as such can dissolve undigested food residue and expel toxins whilst reducing inflammation and swelling.

Medicinal use of the oil has also been well documented in Egypt where castor bean seeds were found in ancient tombs; China, Greece, Rome, Persia, Southern Europe and the Americas.² During the 17th century English physicians in England began to prescribe both oral and topical use and by 1821 Dr J. Thacher described castor oil as "a most efficacious remedy for the dry bellyach and iliac passion"³

Today, some of the most common uses for castor oil that we will discuss in this newsletter include:

- Reducing pain and inflammation
- Supporting detoxification
- Liver function
- Constipation
- Skin health
- Cysts
- Dry eyes

As the evidence base for this age old remedy grows, its position in modern complementary healthcare strengthens.



ACTIVE COMPONENTS

Castor oil is extracted from castor beans by mechanical cold pressing and is refined to remove ricin, a potent toxin.

Castor oil's primary active ingredient is ricinoleic acid (RA), which makes up 80-90% of total fatty acids present.⁴ Other fats include the omega-6 polyunsaturated fatty acid linoleic acid and the monounsaturated omega-9 oleic acid.

RA has been shown to exert analgesic and anti-inflammatory actions⁵ with one study also highlighting antioxidant and antibacterial effects.⁶

PAIN & INFLAMMATION

Anti-inflammatory drugs are widely prescribed in mainstream healthcare, despite evidence for their adverse effects upon the digestive tract and the ability of joint tissues to heal and repair.⁷ Suitable natural alternatives are often used to great effect, for example hop alpha acids⁸, aloe vera⁹, turmeric¹⁰ and omega-3 oils.¹¹ Castor oil can be added to this list as pain and inflammation in various sites in the body are reportedly improved with topical application of the oil.

Pharmacological investigations have found RA to have similar actions to capsaicin, the active compound in chilli peppers. Both RA and capsaicin are particularly effective against nerve pain and neurogenic inflammation¹² due

to their ability to stimulate localised depletion of Substance P, a pro-inflammatory chemical messenger produced by nerve and immune cells.¹³

It is also postulated that castor oil may act as a precursor to prostaglandin formation.¹⁴ The chemical structure of prostaglandins and castor oil are similar and castor oil has been shown to produce various eicosanoids - the group of mediators to which prostaglandins belong. Prostaglandins are involved in regulating body temperature, inflammation and transmission of nerve signals¹⁵: the pain relieving, anti-inflammatory effects of castor oil may be due to its capacity to modulate levels of these powerful compounds.

The effectiveness of topical application of castor oil for joint pain was highlighted in a study on patients undergoing extracorporeal shock wave therapy for painful inflamed joint conditions.¹⁶ Participants had petroleum jelly, castor oil or ultrasonographic gel applied to the affected area before the shock wave therapy began and were asked to rate their experience of pain during the treatment. Those receiving castor oil had

significantly less pain regardless of the location of their joint condition (knee, foot or elbow).

A randomised double-blind placebo comparative clinical study investigated the safety and efficacy of castor oil in comparison to sodium diclofenac (a standard non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug) for patients with knee osteoarthritis.¹⁷ Patients were given either castor oil capsules or sodium diclofenac, a powerful medicinal anti-inflammatory, 3 times a day for 4 weeks. Results showed both drugs to be effective, but adverse reactions were high with sodium diclofenac whilst the castor oil group suffered no adverse effects at all. With chronic degenerative conditions such as osteoarthritis¹⁸, serious consideration must be given to the side effects of long term painkiller use¹⁹: it is clear that viable natural alternatives are both safe and effective.¹⁵ Please note that we only recommend the topical (external) use of castor oil as a way of naturally managing inflammation, as in the previously described study comparing external application of castor oil.¹⁶

CONDITIONS WHICH MAY BENEFIT FROM CASTOR OIL PACKING INCLUDE;

- Arthritis
- Strains and sprains
- Back pain
- Pre-menstrual pain and discomfort
- Pain associated with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and other digestive complaints
- Sciatic pain and neuralgic conditions

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DETOXIFICATION & LIVER FUNCTION

Stimulating and supporting effective detoxification is one of the mainstays of naturopathic practice and castor oil packing has a long tradition of use for this purpose.

One theory as to why castor oil packs are so successful for promoting detoxification is based on the fact that castor oil emits white light, which contains all the light wavelengths of the visible spectrum, just like daylight.²⁰ This light is thought to be able to penetrate deep into tissues, stimulating cellular energy and reducing congestion and stagnation of intracellular and extracellular fluids like lymph.

Before using castor oil packs on specific areas of pain or discomfort it is advised to place one on the site of the liver first, for at least an hour, to ensure that this main eliminatory route is open and able to process any toxins released from other problem areas.

Castor oil packing is an excellent adjunct to any detoxification or cleansing programme, working synergistically with other practical techniques that support the eliminatory pathways such as dry skin brushing and enemas.²⁰

CONSTIPATION

Constipation is an obvious inhibitor of effective detoxification, with built up old faecal matter causing bloating, discomfort, and reduced nutrient absorption and the recirculation of toxins and impurities. Constipation is also a sign of dehydration.²¹ Overuse of laxatives can cause dehydration, reduction of colonic motility ('lazy bowel') and electrolyte imbalance.

Castor oil packs for constipation are generally used alongside the application of warmth – from a hot water bottle or heated grain cushion for example. This has the benefit of relaxing muscles and sphincters in the colon, allowing the free passage of faecal matter, whilst RA from castor oil binds to TRPV1 receptors (also known as the capsaicin receptor found throughout the nervous system and involved in regulation of nociception

and body temperature), enhancing motility and reducing the risk of straining.^{22,23} This packing technique has proven particularly effective in elderly patients who have an increased risk of suffering from constipation. Research into the use of castor oil packs for constipation in the elderly showed improvements in faecal consistency, straining and feelings of complete evacuation.²⁴

SKIN HEALTH

Topical use of castor oil is often suggested for inflammatory skin conditions. Castor oil packing has been shown to produce an increase in T-lymphocyte immune cells below the skin's surface, thereby demonstrating immunomodulating actions. T-lymphocytes are found throughout the skin, mainly in the layers of the epidermis and upper dermis and are able to communicate with the overall general immune response. It is possible that the ability of RA to enhance prostaglandin production may be the mechanism by which castor oil influences T-cell actions.²⁵

CYSTS

The anti-inflammatory and circulatory benefits of castor oil packing may explain its effectiveness for managing both internal and external cysts.

DRY EYES

Meibomian gland dysfunction is a leading cause of dry eye problems. The glands are responsible for producing oily secretions that give stability and lubrication to tears: dysfunction of the glands can lead to dry, sore, irritated eyes.

Researchers in Japan developed low-dose homogenised castor oil eye drops for a double blind placebo-controlled crossover study examining the effects of artificial tears and castor oil eye drops on 20 patients over a 2 week period.²⁶ Results showed significant improvements in symptoms in the castor oil group compared to the placebo. The possible mechanisms of action for the castor oil eye drops include improvement of tear stability as a result of lipid spreading, reduced tear evaporation, and the lubricating effect of the oil eye drops. This is a different approach to using a castor oil pack

- always consult a qualified practitioner before undertaking any naturopathic programme.

HOW TO MAKE A CASTOR OIL PACK

You will need:

- A large piece of unbleached cotton or woollen material, roughly 30cms x 60cms, or a thick cotton flannel
- Organic castor oil
- Cling film (or similar plastic wrap)
- Old towel or something similar
- Hot water bottle or heatable grain bag

Fold the fabric into double or even treble thickness and place on a flat wipe-clean surface. Pour on enough castor oil to soak the fabric. Place the soaked fabric over your liver area then wrap cling film around yourself to keep the pack in place. Wrap the towel round yourself and wear old clothing (in case of any leakages). Place the hot water bottle or warm grain bag over the pack, lie or recline somewhere comfortable and relax for at least an hour. After packing the liver you can repeat the process on any specific area of pain or discomfort. You can store the pack in a bag in the fridge to use again. Replace the pack every month.

CAUTIONS & CONTRAINDICATIONS

- Castor oil packing should not be used during pregnancy, menstruation, or with high blood pressure.
- If any discomfort occurs, stop the process immediately.
- If you are unsure of the suitability of castor oil packing, please consult your healthcare practitioner.

To find a qualified naturopathic nutritional therapist please see Federation of Nutritional Therapy Practitioners (www.fntp.org.uk).



Should you need a more detailed approach, or should you have any questions or concerns that are not addressed in this article, you are always welcome to contact our nutritional advice team on 0845 603 5675 (9.00am – 5.00pm Monday – Friday).

Alternatively if you would like a more personalised approach, addressing dietary recommendations, lifestyle changes etc., we would suggest you consider consulting a qualified nutrition adviser or therapist, which you can do by either asking us for details of your local practitioners, or contacting the Federation of Nutritional Therapy Practitioners on 0870 312 0042 or by emailing them at admin@fntp.org.uk.

For more information visit the website at: www.fntp.org.uk

This newsletter was co-written with and for Nutrigold by Sally Duffin, a highly qualified and practicing Natural Nutritional Therapist and a member of British Association for Applied Nutrition and Nutritional Therapy (BANT).

To find out more please visit www.nutritioninnyork.co.uk.

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