Dental Herbalism: Smart, Natural Care for Your Mouth

Turn to safe and effective herbal remedies for modern-day dental care, from ancient herbal rinses to easy toothpaste.

ALTHOUGH THE BASICS of good oral hygiene seem simple enough—get regular dental checkups and cleanings; brush and floss daily; and eat a healthy diet—for many people, this advice isn’t enough. Nearly half of American adults suffer from periodontal disease, according to the American Academy of Periodontology. In adults older than 65, the prevalence of periodontal disease increases to more than 70 percent.

Periodontal disease is no laughing matter. A chronic inflammatory disease, untreated periodontal disease can lead to tooth loss, and research shows it’s linked to other chronic inflammatory conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. According to some medical professionals, including Bruce Fife, naturopathic physician and author of Oil Pulling Therapy, disease starts in the mouth.

So it seems that standard care may not be enough to ward off periodontal disease for many adults. Thankfully, many safe and effective herbs can help us maintain healthier teeth and gums. Use the following herbal adjuncts to round out your dental care with amazing results.

—GINA DEBACKER

| REMEDY |

ANTIMICROBIAL MOUTHWASH

As a rinse for before and after visiting a dental professional—especially if your mouth is prone to bleeding or an extraction is scheduled—a reliable antimicrobial blend such as the following may reduce the likelihood of further infection by providing broad-spectrum antimicrobial action.

1 teaspoon yarrow tincture
1 to 3 drops myrrh essential oil
2 teaspoons echinacea tincture
2 teaspoons fresh plantain juice (or leaves can be used to make a quid)
10 drops willow tincture

Mix all ingredients and use as a mouth rinse before or after dental work.

Recipe reprinted with permission from Dental Herbalism by Leslie M. Alexander and Linda A. Straub-Bruce, available on page 88.

MORE TIPS

Rinse Effects Rinsing is among the most effective ways to clean the mouth in its entirety. The liquid is swished and gargled, pulled between the teeth, sloshed around in the mouth and then spit out. Never swallow mouthwashes or rinses after use. Make sure to label herbal mouthwashes well and store excess in the refrigerator. This way, various batches with different actions and flavors can be stored, blended and/or used interchangeably.
Saltwater Rinses

Sea salt is a highly effective, widely available and inexpensive resource for the mouth and probably constitutes the simplest, most effective “tooth powder.” Salt is anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and offers wound-healing properties for healing cuts or sores in the mouth.

Saltwater can be used alone or blended with beneficial herbs. A traditional use is to combine common garden sage leaves and sea salt: Pour 1 cup boiling water over 2 teaspoons dried sage leaves. Cover and steep 20 minutes, strain, and add ¼ ounce sea salt. Gargle as needed.

Always use natural sea salt—processed table salts are devoid of healthful minerals and may have fluoride or iodine added. (For those interested in the myriad salts, Mark Bitterman’s manifesto, Salted, is an excellent resource.)

The following are a few suggestions for how to incorporate saltwater rinsing into a daily regimen.

**BASIC SALT SOLUTION:** A reasonable starting place for those with sensitive mouths is 1 teaspoon sea salt combined with 1 cup water. A stronger saline solution will astringe the gums further; 3 to 4 teaspoons can be used routinely. Stir well until the salt is dissolved and an accumulation is observed.

**SALT AND BAKING SODA:** Add 2 teaspoons of baking soda to a salt rinse to help make the mouth more alkaline—an acidic pH of the mouth is closely associated with dental erosion, as acid eats away at tooth enamel. Some people find the taste of baking soda difficult to tolerate. To mask the flavor of the salt and baking soda, you can use herbal teas, such as licorice, as a more supportive and tastier foundation in lieu of water.

**SALT AND HERB TINCTURES:** Herb tinctures can offer various healing benefits to saltwater rinses, from improving bad breath to treating cold sores, depending on the herb. All of the following herb tinctures are antibacterial and antimicrobial; add ½ teaspoon of any of them to a saltwater rinse: cinnamon, clove, echinacea, goldenseal, myrrh, propolis, red clover, rosemary, sage, thyme and/or yarrow.

**SALT AND ESSENTIAL OIL:** Essential oils can also add flavor, scent and healing properties to a rinse. Add one or two drops of 100 percent pure essential oil of clove, peppermint, wintergreen or cinnamon to a salt-water rinse. >>

Genuine Flower Power.

Exciting new form of vitamin A that is 2x more bioavailable than retinol. Plumps up the skin, smooths texture and fine lines, naturally.

Mad Hippie advanced skin care

natural. safe. effective.

Circle #23; see card pg 81
Herbal Mouth Rinses

Herbal mouth rinses are used to remove loose debris, freshen breath and tighten gums. They can also help fight bacteria and viruses, ward off mouth diseases and alleviate pain. They are most often composed of tinctures, decoctions, teas or blends, and can be used daily to prevent or slow the onset of periodontal disease.

Below are a variety of herbs to try in herbal rinses. The herbs included here can be used for multiple conditions of the mouth and the recipes can be altered to meet your individual needs.

Stevia offers a sweet taste and antimicrobial and nutritive properties. We suggest avoiding commercial stevia products and instead working with the leaf, fresh or dried, or a tincture of the leaf in drop doses. Remember, the stevia leaf is very (very) sweet.

Herbs belonging to the mint family (Lamiaceae) have distinctive flavors and are favorites for mouth rinses. These include teas or tinctures of bergamot, rosemary, sage, thyme or lavender.

To freshen breath, use a tea or tincture of peppermint, rosemary, fennel or anise.

Cardamom, cumin, fennel and orange peel combined make a delicious tea. It works as an effective, breath-freshening mouth rinse. You can also drink the tea as a digestive tonic, though not if you’re pregnant or nursing.

Plants with a high vitamin C content may be effective choices when addressing gingivitis, early stages of periodontitis, thrush and other oral manifestations that present challenges to the mucosa. Try teas of rose hips, red raspberry leaves, blackberries or hibiscus flowers.

For acute conditions such as inflammation following a dental cleaning, consider blending tinctures of echinacea, calendula, plantain, yarrow, myrrh, propolis, prickly ash and/or willow—especially willow for any pain. Add to rinse in drop doses.

Cinnamon and clove teas offer antimicrobial activity; for broader action, add one or more of the following herbs, as tea or tincture: calendula, myrrh, propolis, sage, rosemary, thyme, rose hips or cayenne. Note: Because it’s very hot, only the tiniest pinch of dried cayenne should be added, or two to five drops of tincture to one pint of rinse.

Clove essential oil can be used to stem tooth pain, according to Green Pharmacy by Barbara Griggs. Add about a teaspoon of tincture to warm water and use it regularly to help firm gums and stave off cavities.

For early to moderate periodontitis, we can look toward tinctures of barberry, echinacea, myrrh, cayenne, cinnamon, propolis and/or oak. Add to rinse in drop doses.

For advanced periodontitis, two parts barberry tincture and one part goldenseal tincture may be effective additions to any mouth rinse blend.

Recipe reprinted with permission from Dental Herbalism.

Add tinctures of healing herbs to mouth rinses for added benefits.

Reprinted with permission from Dental Herbalism: Natural Therapies for the Mouth by Leslie M. Alexander and Linda A. Straub-Bruce, available on page 88.
HERBAL TOOTHPASTE
This toothpaste recipe comes courtesy Faith Rodgers, a certified herbalist and founder of The Little Herbal blog (thelittleherbal.com). It has been formulated and perfected over time—not only is it loaded with therapeutic herbs, but it has a great texture, taste and overall palatability.

4 tablespoons coconut oil
5 tablespoons baking soda
¼ teaspoon kaolin clay (available at your local health-food store)
2 teaspoons echinacea tincture
¼ teaspoon stevia liquid extract (optional)
30 drops spearmint essential oil

1. Slowly melt coconut oil in a double boiler until liquid.
2. Combine baking soda and kaolin clay in a mixing bowl.
3. Pour liquefied coconut oil in with the baking soda and clay mixture, and combine.
4. Add echinacea tincture, stevia extract (for flavor) and essential oil, mixing well.
5. Stir until coconut oil cools and mixture forms a thick paste. This step is important: If you pour the mixture into your container while the coconut oil is still warm, it may separate.
6. Once a thick paste has formed and mixture is completely cool, spoon into a container with a tight-fitting lid.
7. To use: Apply a small amount of paste to your toothbrush and brush as normal. >>

Recipe courtesy Faith Rodgers, founder of thelittleherbal.com.
Oil Pulling—an age-old remedy that involves the swishing of oil in the mouth—recently saw a flush of attention as a natural health fad. Yet this ancient practice is certainly not tailored to modern tastes. Practiced for centuries in India and southern Asia, oil pulling involves swishing about a tablespoon of an edible oil (sesame, olive, sunflower or coconut oil) around the inside of the mouth. Its proponents claim oil pulling enhances oral health, whitens teeth and improves overall well-being. A series of studies published in the Journal of Indian Society of Pedodontics and Preventive Dentistry between 2008 and 2011 concluded that oil pulling may be an effective dental preventive measure and may lower plaque and gingivitis risk.

Although you certainly shouldn't replace your twice-daily brushing with this holistic practice, you can consider using it to supplement your regular dental care. To try it yourself, swish 1 tablespoon of oil for up to 20 minutes for maximum effect, although some proponents say 10 to 15 minutes will also do the trick. Spit out the oil into a trash can to avoid clogging sinks and rinse with warm water. Do not swallow the oil, as it should now be loaded with bacteria it has drawn from your mouth. Use every day. Do not use if pregnant or nursing.

For more information, check out the book Oil Pulling Therapy: Detoxifying and Healing the Body Through Oral Cleansing by Bruce Fife.

—GINA DEBACKER