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Natural Medicine: Clinical Uses of Peppermint



ASK THE DOCTOR

Answers to Your Health Questions

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Peppermint is a natural hybrid of the garden spearmint and the water mint. First described in England in 1696, peppermint now grows all over the world. For medicinal effects, the aboveground (aerial) portion of the plant is the most widely used. The major medicinal component of peppermint is its volatile oil. The principle components of the oil are menthol, menthone, and methyl acetate, although analysis of peppermint oil will typically show more than 40 different compounds.

History and folk use

Although peppermint was not officially recognized until the 17th century, mints have been used for their medicinal effects for thousands of years. Records from the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman eras show that other members of the mint family, particularly spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), were used. The most popular uses of peppermint for medicinal purposes were in the treatment of indigestion, intestinal colic, colds, fever, and headache.

Pharmacology

The pharmacology of peppermint is attributed almost entirely to its menthol components. The major categories of action for pepper-

mint and menthol are carminative, antispasmodic, choleric, external analgesic, and nasal decongestant.

Carminative effects

Carminatives promote the elimination of intestinal gas. Peppermint and peppermint oil are well-accepted carminatives.

Although the exact mechanism of action has not been determined, one proposed mechanism is relaxation of the esophageal sphincter, leading to the released gas pressure in the stomach.

Antispasmodic effects

The mechanism behind peppermint oil's antispasmodic effect has recently been determined. Researchers have concluded peppermint oil inhibits contractions of isolated smooth muscles by blocking the influx of calcium into the muscle cells. The researchers hypothesized that peppermint oil treats irritable bowel syndrome by inhibiting the hypercontractility of intestinal smooth muscle, thereby returning the muscle to its proper tone.

Choleric effects

Choleric stimulants stimulate the flow of bile. Menthol and related terpenes have been shown to exert a choleric effect as well as improve the solubility of the bile.



External analgesic effects

The external analgesic and counterirritant effects of menthol are well accepted. When applied to the skin, peppermint oil or menthol stimulates the nerves that perceive cold, while simultaneously depressing those for pain. The initial cooling effect is followed by a period of warmth.

Clinical applications

Peppermint oil is the most extensively used of all the volatile oils. Pharmaceutical preparations often utilize peppermint oil or menthol for its therapeutic and flavoring properties. For example, it is used extensively in antacid products and irritant laxatives both

for its flavor and its therapeutic effects. The same is true for its inclusion in mouthwash preparations and after-dinner mints.

The pharmacological effects of peppermint and peppermint oil are useful in a number of clinical situations. Most notable are irritable bowel syndrome, intestinal colic, gallstones, musculoskeletal pain, and the common cold.

Irritable bowel syndrome

Peppermint oil has been used to treat irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) for many years. IBS can include a combination of any of the following symptoms: abdominal pain and distension; more frequent bowel movements with pain, or relief of pain with bowel movements; constipation or diarrhea; excessive production of mucus in the colon; symptoms of indigestion such as flatulence, nausea, or anorexia; and varying degrees of anxiety or depression. One of the central findings in IBS is a hypercontractility of intestinal smooth muscle. As described above, peppermint oil inhibits the hypercontractility of intestinal smooth muscle, making it useful in cases of irritable bowel syndrome as well as intestinal colic.

The preferred delivery of peppermint oil in the treatment of IBS utilizes enteric-coated preparations, which prevent the oil from being released inside the stomach. Without enteric coating, peppermint oil tends to produce heartburn. With the coating, the peppermint oil travels to the small and large intestines, where it relaxes intestinal muscles. Several clinical studies have demonstrated that enteric-coated peppermint oil is quite effective in reducing the abdominal symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome.

In one study, 16 patients with irritable bowel syndrome were given either enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules or placebo for three weeks and then crossed over. During each treatment period, patients kept a daily record of the severity of abdominal symptoms-graded from 0 (a-symptomatic) to 3

(severe symptoms); stool frequency and side effects were also noted. Overall symptoms were graded on a 5-point scale ranging from +2 (terrible) to -2 (much worse).

Results showed a statistically significant advantage for the treatment period when the enteric-coated peppermint oil was used.

Gallstones

In several studies, a formula containing menthol and related terpenes (menthone, pinene, borneol, cineol, and camphene) has demonstrated efficacy in dissolving gallstones. This non-surgical approach to gallstone removal offers an effective alternative to surgery and has been shown to be safe even when consumed for prolonged periods of time (up to four years). Terpenes, like menthol, help dissolve gallstones by reducing bile cholesterol levels in the gallbladder. As menthol was the major component of this formula, peppermint oil, especially if enteric-coated, may offer similar benefits.

The common cold

Menthol and peppermint oil are often employed in the treatment of the common cold as components of topical nasal decongestants, cough and throat lozenges, ointments, salves, and inhalants. Whether the use of these products is of benefit

has not been proven in clinical studies. However their popularity appears to reflect their ability to help make breathing easier during the common cold. The best method of use for menthol or peppermint oil may be applying commercial preparations on the upper chest during periods of rest; the vapors can be inhaled continuously.

Peppermint tea may also help during the common cold. Peppermint as well as other members of the mint family, has demonstrated significant antiviral activity. The most active antiviral components, the polyphenols, are concentrated in the tea. Peppermint oil has shown antiviral activity against Newcastle disease (viral disease of birds that involves respiratory and nervous symptoms; humans can catch it), Herpes simplex, and vaccinia infection in-

duced by smallpox vaccine.

Menthol is also a commonly used ingredient in many over-the-counter cough remedies. A recent study was conducted to determine just how effective menthol is as an antitussive (cough suppressant). In the study, 20 healthy subjects received a cough challenge consisting of five inhalations of 33 micromol citric acid from an air-driven dosimeter. The challenge was repeated at hourly intervals for five hours. Five minutes before each challenge, subjects inhaled, in a randomized design, either menthol (75 percent in eucalyptus oil) or one of two placebos (pine oil or air). The mean number of coughs was significantly lower for menthol (1,734) compared to pine oil (2,293) and air (2,509).

Other studies have shown applying menthol as a chest rub also produces a significant reduction in citric-acid-induced cough 30 and 60 minutes after application.

Unlike other common cough treatments such as dextromethorphan and codeine, which act on the whole system, the mechanism of menthol is probably localized to the airways.

External analgesic

Menthol and related substances can be used as counterirritants in the treatment of arthritis, fibromyositis, tendinitis, and other inflammatory conditions involving the musculoskeletal system.

Toxicity

Peppermint herb is generally regarded as safe when used as a tea; however, hypersensitivity reactions have been reported. Adverse reactions to enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules are rare, but can include hypersensitivity reactions (skin rash) and heartburn. When applied to the skin, peppermint oil or menthol can cause an allergic reaction. The likelihood of developing such a reaction is enhanced when heating pads are used in conjunction with the peppermint oil.

