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## Graedons' Guide to

# Home Remedies

### Raisin d'Être

"Empty one box of golden light raisins into a large shallow container. Pour enough gin to completely cover the raisins. Let stand, uncovered, for about seven days until all of the liquid evaporates. Stirring occasionally will help the evaporation process. After the gin has evaporated, place the raisins in a closed container ... Eat nine raisins a day. If you don't like raisins, put them on your cereal or in a salad."

Attributed to "The Acts of Saint Lucas," the newsletter of St. Lucas Lutheran Church, Toledo, OH.

Years ago a trip to the doctor might mean the better part of a day spent traveling. It's little wonder that back then, folks didn't usually consult a physician except for a serious medical emergency. When it came to a minor problem, more often than not they dealt with it at home. Grandparents passed their folk remedies down through the generations. What with the cost of a consultation going higher and higher, many people today still prefer to use home remedies for situations that are annoying but not serious. Not everyone has the chance to learn these simple methods from a knowledgeable grandma, though, so we have collected a few of our favorites here to share them with you.

We can't vouch for most of these tips, though. Scientists don't usually put time and money into testing them carefully to see whether they are safe and effective.

Every so often, of course, an old wive's tale will be vindicated by medical research. Cranberry juice, for example, has been shown to help prevent cystitis. For the most part, however, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies are lacking.

Recipes for home remedies are a little bit like the recipes a good cook might use: there's room for variation and interpretation, a pinch more of this or less of that. The most important ingredient in home treatment is good judgment. Don't forget, there are times when you must seek professional medical help; if you are allergic to bee stings and you get stung, go **immediately** to an emergency room. But if your hands are chapped, you don't necessarily need to see a dermatologist. You can probably find something at your neighborhood pharmacy ... or local farm store ... to solve the problem. As with all self-treatment, common sense is essential.

### THE RAISIN REMEDY

Where do home remedies come from? How do people learn about them? We haven't a clue who thought up the idea of soaking raisins in gin and decided nine a day is the right dose for arthritis. We first heard about this remedy from Jim Campbell in Hendersonville, NC, but the note he sent us credited several other folks. Lois Loebide in Toledo, OH, wrote it up in her parish newsletter, but she learned about it from a friend of hers in Hyannis, MA, who heard about it from a podiatrist in Washington, D.C. Who knows where he found out about raisins and gin!

We've never experienced anything like the enthusiastic response to this home remedy. Many people have written to us from all over the country to sing the praises of gin-soaked raisins: *"I was interested to read your column about gin-soaked raisins for arthritis relief. I heard about this home remedy from a friend who knew I had problems with painful osteoarthritis. I had tried all kinds of medicine, from aspirin to Voltaren, without much result. I started the remedy and after about a month I really noticed a difference. It was much easier to get out of bed in the morning. I can climb stairs without stopping halfway up. I can play tennis three or four times a week without suffering afterwards. These are just a few things that have changed since I started on the raisin remedy. It's not a cure for arthritis, but it is a lot cheaper than the high-priced medicine that hurt my stomach and I believe it has helped me."*

We don't know if the "raisin remedy" works or is just a figment of people's imaginations. There are no scientific studies, but juniper (the flavoring in gin) has historically been used to treat stomach problems, bronchitis and even arthritis. Compared to many other arthritis treatments, this one seems benign.

Because the original recipe specified that the gin had to evaporate, the most frequently asked question was "Do these raisins ever dry out?" We heard from people who waited days or even weeks for the raisins to dry. Others ate their gin-soaked snack while still soggy. We now know the raisins never really dry out, but we asked pharmacologist Brian Thomas at Research Triangle Institute to test them for alcohol on his high-tech mass spec machine. The verdict — less than one drop of alcohol left in nine raisins — not enough to harm most folks.

**Aquamirabilis**  
2325 Third Street # 216  
San Francisco, CA 94107

**Bag Balm**  
Dairy Association Co.  
Lyndonville, VT 05851  
(800) 232-3610

**Udder Cream**  
Redex Industries, Inc.  
P.O. Box 939  
Salem, OH 44460  
(800) 345-7339

**Arthritis Remedy**  
**Drs. Chas. & Bill Mayo**

Several years ago we heard from a reader who wrote: "In 1950 my teacher went to the Mayo Clinic for crippling arthritis. She was 27 years old and spent six weeks at the clinic. The treatment was a miracle for her. She was given a formula to continue taking, which she shared with me for my mother. The jar of little black balls in her fridge changed my mother's life. Here it is:

"Remove the stems from three pounds of dried figs and grind the figs with one and a half pounds of seeded raisins in a food chopper. Add three ounces of powdered senna, two ounces of powdered charcoal and one ounce of slippery elm, a little at a time. Mix in by hand three ounces of olive oil and one ounce of glycerine. Make the mixture into balls about the size of a nickel.

"Take one ball night and morning for one week, then one ball a day for six months. This formula makes about 235 balls. Keep them in an icebox or refrigerator in a covered glass jar.

"Upon rising in the morning sip the juice of a lemon in as hot water as possible with one quarter teaspoon of cream of tartar."

## DRY SKIN SOLUTIONS

Making up about 15 percent of your total body weight, your skin is like a general health barometer and serves as a warning system sending signals to your brain about extreme heat, cold and sharp things.

Because there is so much skin on the body, it is logical that there are tons of home remedies that deal with making it softer, making it smoother, soothing stings and warding off warts. In our newspaper column, we have frequently had the opportunity to discuss skin-care products, and you have certainly let us know about your favorites in the moisturizer department.

We wrote about an elegant but pricey hand cream for cooks, called **Aquamirabilis**. Made of mango kernel oil and beeswax, this product is certainly something you could use on your hands without turning the food funny flavors. Then we got this letter:

"When you wrote about hand cream for cooks, you missed out on a simple and inexpensive hand moisturizer. **Crisco** has long been used by chefs and is completely edible." Indeed it is edible — on hands and in pie crusts too.

A reader who served in the WAVES during World War II used **Crisco** for makeup removal. She even suggested, "**Crisco** can be whipped in a mixer with a drop of vegetable coloring and perfume for a fancy cleansing cream!" Other readers, including actors, confirmed the value of **Crisco**.

Petroleum jelly (**Vaseline**), while not edible, is also a terrific moisturizer. When we wrote about a young mother with dry skin from rinsing diapers and washing her hands, a reader suggested, "After she finishes washing her hands, she should not dry them completely. She should immediately rub in a pea-sized chunk of **Vaseline** until all the droplets of water have been absorbed. I guarantee that if she does this each time she washes her hands, the skin will heal and not be rough. I know — I had the very same problem when my children were babies."

One reader complained that her heels were so rough, dry and calloused that when she removed her panty hose "I

actually have to rip them away." Rather than add an expensive moisturizer to her panty hose bill, dermatologist Robert Gilgor suggested she apply petroleum jelly after bathing and then cover the heels with plastic wrap, keeping it in place with a stocking. Three weeks of this treatment nightly should help smooth the skin.

We did caution the reader that if this remedy didn't work it was possible that she had a fungal infection and that **Micatin** or **Lotrimin AF** used daily for a month or two may be helpful. If not, she should probably see a dermatologist.

Easily the most mail we have gotten about relief for dry skin concerns products you probably won't find at your local drug store. Over the last several years we have become aware of the wonders of what we call "barnyard beauty aids." A musician writes: "I am a professional harpist and I learned early to use **Bag Balm** during dry winter weather — with cotton gloves at night." Carol wrote: "A friend of mine who also quilts gave me a sample of **Udder Cream** and I love it! Since I am diabetic, my skin gets really dry and **Udder Cream** helps. I like the texture and the fact that it's non-greasy. I'm getting rid of all my other creams and using just this." Other quilters claim that the antiseptic in **Bag Balm** helps heal the pricks they get from their needles.

Because they are intended for use on cows, you'll usually find **Bag Balm** and **Udder Cream** in feed stores and farm co-op stores. One reason people like these products so much is the cost. At about 50 to 70 cents an ounce, they are far less expensive than name-brand moisturizers.

Whatever product you choose, the best time to use it is right after washing. Pat the skin dry and apply the moisturizer to seal the water in. It also helps to avoid harsh soaps and detergents, which can strip the skin of its moisture-retaining oils.

## ITCHES AND OUCHES

Lots of people have been faced with stings — bees, wasps, yellowjackets and

the like have a way of ruining a good picnic or outing. Quite a few folks have written to tell us that putting the cut side of an onion on a sting makes it feel better much quicker. Others like to mix up a little meat tenderizer with water to make a paste that can be dabbed on a sting. Still another refinement calls for mixing the meat tenderizer with enough white vinegar to dissolve it. This comes, we are told, from a lifeguard in Hawaii who maintains the solution is very effective against jellyfish stings.

We have also been told that baking soda mixed up with vinegar into a foaming paste will help a sting. Some people dispense with the vinegar and concentrate on a baking soda-and-water paste. One woman recommends moistening an Alka-Seltzer tablet and putting it on the sting as soon as it starts to fizz. Whether this might work any better than a plain baking soda paste, we have no idea, but it might be easier to pack a tablet into a pocket or picnic basket.

Of course a severe reaction to a sting is an emergency situation, not appropriate for home remedies. If a person who has been stung develops breathing problems, hives or widespread itching, or starts to feel faint or nauseated, call the ambulance immediately. Sting allergies can result in life-threatening shock.

For ordinary itchy bug bites, not stings, one of the most effective ways to stop the itching involves no expense at all. Hot water, uncomfortable but not hot enough to burn (120° to 130° F), for a few seconds may give relief that can last a few hours. We hear that this easy itch treatment may also be helpful for limited areas of poison ivy.

## WAR ON WARTS

Surprisingly, hot water may also work on some plantar warts. These flattish warts on the sole of the foot can be hard to treat, and by no means all of them respond to hot water soaks. But this may be worth a try before seeing the dermatologist for surgery. Dr. Samuel Moschella of Harvard Medical School discovered an old medical reference to this treatment, and tried it. It worked for some of his patients. The idea is to soak the affected foot once a week in water 100° to 113° F. Each session is half an hour to an hour and a half long, and the course of treatment lasts eight weeks.

There are quite a few popular home remedies for treating everyday warts as well. We've heard from many folks that castor oil applied twice a day will get rid of a wart. Others prefer vinegar to banish those bumps.

## AVON SKIN-SO-SOFT AGAINST BUGS?

Avon's Skin-So-Soft, a bath oil and moisturizer, has developed a cult following for its reputed ability to repel mosquitoes, gnats, no-seem-ums and biting flies. Avon doesn't advertise or endorse Skin-So-Soft for its anti-bug activity, but we've received amazing testimonials from hunters, fishermen, campers and Marines, all of whom believe this bath oil helps prevent bites.

Consumer Reports recently rated bug repellents and the results suggest that Skin-So-Soft doesn't deserve its reputation. Compared to commercial repellents the testers found the bath oil "ineffective" against mosquitoes. It did deter stable flies, however, at least to some extent. And although there are lots and lots of folks who swear by Skin-So-Soft, we have also heard from those who found it useless as an insect repellent.

If you still want to try Skin-So-Soft you can order it by calling 1-800-FOR-AVON. The company has recently introduced a product specifically designed as a bug repellent, called Skin-So-Soft Moisturizing Suncare Mosquito, Flea & Deer Tick Repellent.

Do be careful if you plan to try your favorite remedy on Fido or Fluffy, though. Some dog owners are enthusiastic about Skin-So-Soft for keeping fleas away, but cats lick their fur in grooming themselves and may ingest too much of the oil. This could be harmful. Check with the vet before applying any over-the-counter medicine or home remedy to your pet.

## Homemade Dandruff Remedy

Dr. Robert Gilgor, dermatologist, suggests this homemade dandruff shampoo:

**Mix 1 part** 100% propylene glycol  
**with 4 parts** baby shampoo.

This mixture should be gentle and effective. You'll have to ask your pharmacist for propylene glycol, a common ingredient in skin care products.

*A lab tech wrote to tell us she treated a wart the size of a dime by soaking her finger in vinegar and applying a vinegar compress for an hour or two a day. Before she tried this, the dermatologist had unsuccessfully frozen the wart three times. The vinegar worked after about six weeks. She reports "my husband and coworkers are amazed. They're also glad I don't smell like I'm wearing vinegar perfume anymore."*

## Wart Plaster for Splinters?

Sometimes it's hard to convince a young child to hold still while you go after the sliver with a tweezer. Pediatrician Russell Copelan suggests a little piece of salicylic acid plaster, sold for wart treatment, be applied to the area of the splinter and left in place for 12 hours. Within two or three days, most splinters will have worked their way out with no trouble. If not, then you can fetch the tweezers.

## **Saving Your Stomach**

### **Other Herbal Helpers:**

Anise seeds  
Caraway seeds  
Catnip  
Chamomile  
Dill  
Fennel seeds  
Licorice  
Peppermint  
Sage

What we do to our stomachs is a shame: overeating or skipping meals, grabbing snacks on the go, and gulping down coffee, cola or cocktails. No wonder tummy-aches are common. Very often, though, they are susceptible to self-treatment. One of the cheapest and easiest approaches to simple heartburn, in fact, is just chewing gum or sucking on a piece of hard candy. This stimulates saliva, which helps wash acid back into the stomach where it belongs.

### **HERBAL REMEDIES**

A soothing cup of chamomile tea might be helpful in this case as well. It has been used for centuries to treat digestive problems, and modern research shows some of its components are effective anti-spasmodic and anti-inflammatory agents. When it comes to heartburn, of course, the mere facts that it is soothing and wet and won't make things worse as it washes the acid back into the stomach are significant. Serious allergic reactions have occurred, though, so chamomile should probably be avoided by anyone sensitive to ragweed pollen.

When it comes to indigestion, the next step beyond chamomile tea might still be in your pantry. Bananas are a traditional Indian remedy for indiges-

tion and ulcers. Try a banana for a bellyache.

Herbal indigestion aids have been used for centuries. Ginger may be one of the best. It is available in capsule form at most health food stores. Two capsules have been recommended as a starting dose. In addition, ginger has been shown to prevent motion sickness. In one test it even outperformed an over-the-counter remedy.

### **BAKING SODA**

You won't even have to leave the kitchen to find one of America's most popular antacids. Baking soda, or sodium bicarbonate, is a time-honored acid-neutralizer. (It is the digestive aid in Alka-Seltzer.) The usual dose is one-half teaspoon (use a measuring spoon to make it accurate) in four ounces of water. Baking soda is very high in sodium, though, so it isn't for anyone on a salt-restricted regimen. There are important safety warnings on the box, including: "do not ingest food, liquid or any antacid when stomach is overly full to avoid possible injury to the stomach." This precaution appeared after a hapless fellow stuffed himself to the limit, took bicarb for the discomfort, and suffered an explosion in his stomach that landed him in the hospital.

### **PASS THE BICARB!**

We defy you to name one other product that has as many uses as plain old baking soda. From scrubbing the sink to cleaning the connections on a car battery to making chocolate chip cookies rise, sodium bicarbonate is almost indispensable.

Probably the foremost medical use for baking soda is as an antacid. It has also gained popularity as a dentifrice. Some people brush their teeth with baking soda, and a trip down the toothpaste aisle at your local drug store will show just how popular baking soda is in oral hygiene. It is less abrasive than some toothpastes and preliminary dental research suggests it may even be helpful in reducing the risk of gum disease. Baking soda in water is also an excellent gargle.

Its deodorant properties are legendary, but did you know that smelly feet could benefit? Wade, in Deer Park, Texas, offers the following advice: "When I was a kid my feet smelled and sweat something awful. I confided to my barber and he gave me a solution for them.

"Take a pan big enough for your feet and fill it with water as hot as you can stand. Put two tablespoons of plain old baking soda in the water and soak the feet for 30 minutes for 30 nights.

"Throw away those synthetic sneakers because they hold in the moisture. Leather or canvas shoes with a clean pair of socks each day will breathe better. I'm 72 and my feet don't sweat and I feel at ease if I have to take my shoes off for any reason."

Thirty days of baking soda soaks may not last until you are 72, but it certainly does seem safe and inexpensive. Other readers rave about baking soda and cornstarch as an underarm deodorant.

## VIM AND VINEGAR

Vinegar is a perennial American favorite when it comes to home remedies. Back in 1958, Dr. D.C. Jarvis had a big best seller in his book, *Folk Medicine: A Vermont Country Doctor's Guide to Good Health*. In it, Dr. Jarvis gives credit to the farm families using their simple home remedies and tonics. These folks, and Dr. Jarvis too, put a lot of stock in a daily dose of vinegar as an all-purpose tonic. Presumably, this approach has been kicking around since Vermont was a colony — or maybe even before.

As far as we can tell, there is no medical evidence that vinegar will lower cholesterol or protect against heart attacks, arthritis or anything else for that matter. But Patti in Shillington, Pa., is convinced: "Raw apple cider vinegar is an old New England remedy for arthritis. It works the same as it would on an old teapot with heavy mineral deposits. The vinegar dissolves the calcium deposits on joints in the same way."

So far as we know, calcium is not responsible for most arthritis pain. And vinegar is unlikely to clean out joints.

Norma in Dunnsville, Va., brings up a good point: "I'm one of those people doing the vinegar trick. I make my own concoction and allow one tablespoon vinegar daily. It's not too bad once you get used to it. Far more palatable to me than a glass of wine!"

"My question: how will I know if in fact it is doing anything positive for me? I have read it is touted to remove fatty deposits from your blood which in turn would be good for your heart. Do I have to wait for an autopsy to determine the results? Or will a cholesterol test tell? Has anyone reported an improvement in cholesterol after vinegar cocktails for months? Maybe I'm just turning myself into a PICKLE."

Other readers have suggested rinsing dry hands in cider vinegar, soaking hangnails in one teaspoon vinegar to 8 ounces of water, or even douching with 2 tablespoons white vinegar to a pint of warm water for vaginal yeast infections. We don't recommend routine douching, but a woman with recurrent problems might ask her doctor about this remedy.

## FIGHTING FUNGUS

Marion in Conroe, Texas, agrees that vinegar doesn't have to be swallowed to be helpful. "Some of my friends use vinegar to soak a sprained ankle. Remember the nursery rhyme about Jack and Jill?"

Who would ever believe that vinegar would also be good against fungus? The old expression "there's a fungus among us" is often true. Fungi love warm, damp places, whether they be old tree stumps or the crevices between our toes (athlete's foot). For reasons that are not entirely clear, fungal infections of toenails become more common as we get older. The nail becomes thick and yellowish-brown. Prescription medicines may take 6 months or longer to work and can be very expensive. The vinegar soak has met with a lot of enthusiasm from some of our readers:

"For years I had a single toenail so infected by fungus that it was too thick to be cut with a nail clipper. For almost a year I had been treating it twice a day with an over-the-counter product, but I'd seen essentially no improvement in the nail.

"Then I read in your column about soaking infected toes in a 1/3 solution of vinegar (1 part vinegar to two parts of water) for 15 minutes a day and I tried it. After five weeks of soaking for 45 minutes a day, the fungus has completely disappeared and the nail is growing out normally.

"The product I was using is fairly expensive, and vinegar costs pennies by comparison. Thank you for the suggestion."

We can't find any research validating the vinegar cure for fungus, but an acidic environment does make it hard for fungi to survive. An ear, nose and throat specialist suggested vinegar soaks for an itchy ear that he suspected was due to fungal infection. He said to mix up a white vinegar solution (1 part vinegar to 5 parts tepid water) and rinse out the ear three times a day using an rubber ear bulb. This worked when we tried it. **Of course, any infection that doesn't heal should be seen by an M.D.**

## Arthritis Remedies

We received this recipe from readers who say it is supposed to have been used by Sam Houston. "Make a potion of: five parts grape juice, three parts apple juice, and one part cider vinegar. A daily dose of this potion, half a cup will do, helps relieve the aches and pains of Arthritis."

*Certo and grape juice is another popular remedy for arthritis. One couple takes two teaspoons Certo in three ounces of grape juice three times a day. They cut back to one teaspoon in juice twice a day as the pain subsides. An alternate recipe: 1 tablespoon Certo in 8 oz. of grape juice once daily.*

*Certo, used to make jams and jellies, is found with the canning supplies in most supermarkets. It is a liquid containing pectin, potassium citrate and citric acid. No scientific evidence indicates whether this or any other pectin-containing product is truly helpful.*

## Home Remedies For Nail Fungus

Other treatments that have been tried with mixed success include:

- Pierce a vitamin E capsule with a pin and squirt the oil between the toe and the nail.
- Apply Vicks VapoRub twice a day
- Soak feet in a solution of Pau d'Arco tea (available in health food stores).
- Alternative soaks include rubbing alcohol or white iodine.

## Sleeping Solutions

### Sleepy-time Snacks

Cheerios and honey  
Toast and jam  
Bagel  
Turkey sandwich  
Instant oatmeal  
Herbal teas  
Malted milk  
Graham crackers

Many a grandmother has soothed a sleepless child with a cup of warm milk, sweetened with a spoonful of sugar or honey. We used to think that the value of this common remedy lay mainly in the calm and loving way it is best administered. There's a lot to be said for that, of course, especially when a person can't doze off because of anxiety or eager anticipation.

We now know, however, that there is at least some scientific basis for the soporific effects of milk. Milk protein is rich in tryptophan, an amino acid that serves as the fundamental building block for serotonin, the body's natural sleep-inducing neurochemical. Scientists tell us that carbohydrates enhance the effect of tryptophan so it can be helpful to add some sweetening or a cookie to the regimen. For some people, herbs like chamomile, hops, valerian, catnip, or St-John's-Wort may aid drowsiness.

### Action for Asthma

A traditional treatment for asthma involves the medicine theophylline (**Elixophyllin, Slo-bid, Theo-Dur, Theo-24**, etc.). This drug is chemically related to caffeine. Although we would not recommend this home remedy for a serious asthma attack, the following anecdote demonstrates the power of this compound.

*"You saved my honeymoon and I just want to thank you. My husband and I left for Hawaii immediately after the wedding. In all the excitement I forgot my asthma medicine. Although I don't have to take it every day I always keep some on hand.*

*"The day after we arrived we took a*

### JET LAG

Our bodies have a hard time shifting through multiple time zones. People who travel from the East Coast to the West often wake up the first morning before dawn. Their brains were tricked by a natural chemical called melatonin. The further you travel the harder it is to adapt.

Bright sunlight may be one of the best ways to reset your biological clock. About 30 minutes to an hour of sunlight during the day can be helpful. The ultraviolet radiation suppresses melatonin and helps shift the body's schedule to the new time zone.

If the problem is waking up too early, it's best to get your light in the late afternoon. When falling asleep is difficult, as it may be for those traveling east, sit in the sun as early in the morning as possible.

*long walk on the beach and by the time we got back I was wheezing. I almost panicked until I remembered reading in your book that coffee can act as an emergency treatment for asthma.*

*"Three cups controlled my attack and I didn't have any more trouble. The rest of the honeymoon was great!"*

Although it is not an adequate substitute for medication, two or three cups of brewed coffee may provide relief in a pinch for someone experiencing a mild asthma attack.

Your story demonstrates just how important it is to pack medication along with your toothbrush and other essential items.

### Hiccup Remedies

There are dozens of home remedies for hiccups, from sipping water from the wrong side of the cup to swallowing a teaspoon of sugar dry. A reader recently sent us this time honored recommendation:

"This remedy for hiccups was given to me by a retired Washington Redskin about 40 years ago. Take a wedge of lemon sprinkled with one teaspoon of granulated sugar and 4 or 5 drops of Angostura Bitters. Bite into the lemon and suck it. No more hiccups!"

If you would like to learn more about herbal products and home remedies, not to mention the best over-the-counter and prescription drugs, we recommend *The People's Pharmacy Guide to Home and Herbal Remedies* (St. Martin's Press).

Look for it at your library or order directly from us. Use the enclosed form, call us toll free 1-800-732-2334 weekdays, or send \$27.95 plus \$3.00 postage and handling: **Graedons' People's Pharmacy**  
**P. O. Box 52027**  
**Durham, NC 27717-2027**