

## **CASTOR OIL: MODERN USES FOR AN OLD FOLK REMEDY**

My first encounter with the amazing healing powers of castor oil took place during a business trip to Amsterdam, Holland, nearly 20 years ago. As I got off the plane from Toronto, I felt a sharp pain in my lower back, radiating down into my leg. Whether it was triggered by the long hours of sitting crunched up in an uncomfortable airplane seat or by the heavy suitcase I was carrying, I'll never know. By the time I got to my hotel room, I was in agony, barely able to stand up straight. Even lying down on the bed was painful.

What was I to do? I didn't know anyone in the city, and I was scheduled to attend some important meetings the following day. The staff at the hotel reception desk couldn't tell me how to locate a chiropractor. I wasn't interested in going to a doctor for a prescription painkiller or muscle-relaxant. I remembered that "Sleeping Prophet" Edgar Cayce had often suggested castor oil packs for various aches and pains, and I remembered having read of this remedy's effectiveness in cases of sciatica.

I managed to take a cab to a nearby drugstore, where I purchased a bottle of castor oil. No doubt the pharmacist thought that I was bent over because of constipation!

Back at the hotel, I soaked a towel in the oil and wrapped it around my lower back. In a proper castor oil pack, a cloth of wool or cotton flannel is folded in several layers, then saturated with warm castor oil, and placed on the affected area. But I had to make do with a hotel towel and room-temperature oil. I also didn't have access to a heating pad or hot water bottle to add the prescribed warmth to the pack. The idea is that heat allows the oil to penetrate the skin and work its way deep into the tissues. I figured that the heat generated by my body would have to do. Finally, I cut open some plastic bags and spread them on the bed before lying down, to avoid getting oil on the sheets.

Tired from the overnight flight, and exhausted from the pain, I drifted off into a deep sleep. When I woke up a few hours later, I was drowsy with jet-lag, but the pain was gone! It had completely disappeared, and I was able to sit, stand, and walk normally. An impressive result for a clumsy first attempt with makeshift tools!

Since that time, I have witnessed the powerful healing force contained in castor oil on numerous occasions. My family and I have successfully used castor oil packs and rubs for various kinds of abdominal complaints, headaches, inflammatory conditions, muscle pains, skin eruptions and lesions. Castor oil is a staple item in our medicine cabinet at home, and whenever we travel, we pack a small bottle of castor oil.

## The Palma Christi

Castor oil is extracted from the seed of the castor oil plant, whose botanical name is *ricinus communis*. While it was Cayce who brought castor oil packs to fame in the 20th century, the oil has a long and varied history of use as a healing agent in folk medicine around the world. According to a research report in a recent issue of the *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine*, castor bean seeds, believed to be 4,000 years old, have been found in Egyptian tombs, and historical records reveal the medicinal use of castor oil in Egypt (for eye irritations), India, China (for induction of childbirth and expulsion of the placenta), Persia (for epilepsy), Africa, Greece, Rome, Southern Europe, and the Americas. In ancient Rome, the castor oil plant was known as *Palma Christi*, which translates into *hand of Christ*. This name is still sometimes used today.

A book about the Vermont style of folk medicine by D.C. Jarvis published in 1958 lists numerous conditions which respond well to the topical application of castor oil, including irritation of the conjunctiva of the eye; to promote healing of the umbilicus in a newborn; and to increase milk flow in lactating women when applied to the breasts. As a nursing mom, I can attest to the effectiveness of castor oil applied to sore, irritated, or inflamed nipples. It works faster than any commercial salve, and I don't have to worry about washing it off before the next nursing. Any trace of the oil that my son may get in his mouth is definitely not going to harm him!

No one could claim more experience with the clinical application of castor oil than Dr. William A. McGarey, Chairman of the Board of the A.R.E. Clinic in Phoenix, Arizona. In the course of his medical career spanning over several decades, Dr. McGarey has published numerous articles and books covering treatments with various Cayce remedies. In his recently revised and updated book about castor oil, entitled *The Oil That Heals*, Dr. McGarey recounts being told a story in 1965 by a man who, some years earlier, had travelled to a Virginia mountain town to visit his sister. This man "had developed an intensely inflamed finger." writes Dr. McGarey. "A local physician advised him to go to a larger city to have a surgeon work on it. He was about to leave at once, for the finger was very painful, when his sister influenced him to show the finger to 'Aunt Minnie', who lived up the hills and who was a midwife. As soon as she saw it, she told him to wrap a flannel cloth soaked in castor oil around the finger and leave it there. He followed her advice and direction, and by morning most of the inflammation and all of the soreness were gone. By the morning of the second day, all the swelling and inflammation had gone, and a grain of sand (acquired while he was bathing on the seashore one week earlier) was discovered under the edge of the fingernail. This came out with the castor oil bandage, and the finger was healed."

Dr. McGarey has successfully used the castor oil packs in a clinical setting for numerous conditions, including liver and gall bladder disturbances, abscesses, headaches, appendicitis, epilepsy, hemorrhoids, constipation, intestinal

obstructions, hyperactivity in children, and to avert threatened abortions in pregnant women. In *The Oil That Heals*, Dr. McGarey says that Edgar Cayce described at least thirty different physiological functions that could be changed for the better through the use of castor oil applied topically, mostly by the use of the packs.

### **Help for Women's Problems**

In *The Edgar Cayce Handbook for Health through Drugless Therapy*, the late Dr. Harold J. Reilly, who worked with the information provided in the Cayce readings for forty-five years, recalls the case of a woman who had been suffering from excessive bleeding of the uterus for thirteen years. By the time she came to see Dr. Reilly, her problem was threatening to disrupt her career as an opera singer, as well as her ability to function normally in her personal life as a wife and mother. Four leading gynecologists whom she had consulted had all recommended some kind of surgery, from a simple D&C to a total hysterectomy. Dr. Reilly put her on a regimen that began with colonic irrigations and castor oil packs four nights on, three nights off. The woman later reported that "after the first two nights of the castor oil packs ... the spotting stopped, and this was remarkable, because it was just after my menstrual period, and usually that went on and on. By the end of the week, I sang in a concert and felt fine."

In her popular book *Take Charge of Your Body*, Canadian physician Dr. Carolyn DeMarco recommends the application of castor oil packs at night for the relief of pain and swelling associated with varicose veins. And in a 1994 article in *Health Naturally* magazine, Dr. DeMarco writes about the recommendation of American gynecologist Dr. Christine Northrup to apply castor oil packs to the lumpy, painful breasts of women who suffer from cystic breast disease.

Susun Weed, author of the book *Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year*, says that in traditional midwifery, castor oil is used internally and externally to stimulate the uterus, soften the cervix, and help initiate labour. She suggests rubbing castor oil on the belly and covering with a warm towel if the cervix is ripe and labour seems near. Some midwives rub castor oil on the feet to help labour along.

### **How Castor Oil Works on the Body**

A country doctor whom Dr. McGarey quotes in *The Oil That Heals*, once said: "Castor oil will leave the body in better condition than it found it." But the physiological workings of castor oil's interaction with the body remain somewhat elusive. Dr. McGarey says: "We still have no explanation why ..... a pack using this oil will help restore normalcy to a hyperactive child, or speed up the healing of hepatitis, or help to get rid of gallstones, or even help heal abrasions and infections. Perhaps [*the explanation*] is to be found in the nature of the human

body and the secret capabilities of the substances God gave us here on the earth for our use and benefit."

Dr. McGarey is very humble in his statement, for he does present a plausible hypothesis relating to Edgar Cayce's suggestion that castor oil packs can strengthen the *Peyer's Patches*, which are tiny patches of lymphatic tissue in the mucosal surface of the small intestine. According to Cayce, the Peyer's Patches produce a substance which facilitates electrical contact between the autonomous and the cerebrospinal nervous system when it reaches those areas via the bloodstream. Dr. McGarey thus understands Cayce to say that the health of the entire nervous system is, to an extent, maintained through the substance produced by the Peyer's Patches when they are in good health. Although the Peyer's Patches were discovered in 1677, it is only recently that medical science has begun to recognize them as constituents of the body's immune system.

Current research appears to confirm Dr. McGarey's theory. A double-blind study, described by Harvey Grady in a report entitled *Immunomodulation through Castor Oil Packs* published in a recent issue of the *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine*, examined lymphocyte values of 36 healthy subjects before and after topical castor oil application. This study identified castor oil as an anti-toxin, and as having impact on the lymphatic system, enhancing immunological function. The study found that castor oil pack therapy of a minimal two-hour duration produced an increase in the number of T-11 cells within a 24-hour period following treatment, with a concomitant increase in the number of total lymphocytes. This T-11 cell increase represents a general boost in the body's specific defense status, since lymphocytes actively defend the health of the body by forming antibodies against pathogens and their toxins. T-cells identify and kill viruses, fungi, bacteria, and cancer cells.

Castor oil packs are a simple home therapy which often produces astounding results. When we consider the Cayce statement quoted in Dr. McGarey's book, "There's as much of God in a teaspoonful of castor oil as there is in a prayer!", we may begin to appreciate the powerful healing potential of the "*Palma Christi*".

### **Castor Oil Pack Instructions**

(excerpted from *The Oil That Heals* by William A. McGarey, M.D.)

Prepare a flannel cloth which is two or three thicknesses when folded and which measures about eight inches in width and ten to twelve inches in length after it is folded. This is the size needed for abdominal application - other areas may need a different size pack, as seems applicable. Pour castor oil into a pan and soak the cloth in the oil. Wring out the cloth so that it is wet but not drippy with the castor oil (or simply pour castor oil onto the pack so it is soaked). Apply the cloth to the area which needs treatment. Most often, the pack should be placed so it covers the area of the liver.

Protection against soiling bed clothing can be made by putting a sheet underneath the body. Then a plastic covering should be applied over the soaked flannel cloth. On top of the plastic, place a heating pad and turn it up to "medium" to begin, then to "high" if the body tolerates it. It helps to wrap a large towel around the body to hold the pack snugly in place, using large safety pins on the towel. The pack should remain in place between an hour to an hour and a half.

The skin can be cleansed afterwards, if desired, by using water which is prepared as follows: to a quart of water, add two teaspoons of baking soda. Use this to cleanse the abdomen. Keep the flannel pack wrapped in plastic for future use. It need not be discarded after one application, but can usually be used many times.

Note: Always use a high-quality, cold-pressed castor oil, available in health food stores.

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