

Home Cures and Popular Beliefs

CHAPTER

1

Everywhere on earth people use home remedies. In some places, the older or *traditional* ways of healing have been passed down from parents to children for hundreds of years.

Many home remedies have great value. Others have less. And some may be risky or harmful. Home remedies, like modern medicines, must be used with caution.

**Try to do no harm.
Only use remedies if you are sure they are safe
and know exactly how to use them.**

HOME CURES THAT HELP

For many sicknesses, time-tested home remedies work as well as modern medicines—or even **better**. They are often **cheaper**. And in some cases they are **safer**.

For example, many of the herbal teas people use for home treatment of coughs and colds do more good and cause fewer problems than cough syrups and strong medicines some doctors prescribe.

Also, the rice water, teas, or sweetened drinks that many mothers give to babies with diarrhea are often safer and do more good than any modern medicine. What matters most is that a baby with diarrhea get plenty of liquids (see p. 151).



FOR COUGHS, COLDS, AND COMMON DIARRHEA, HERBAL TEAS ARE OFTEN *BETTER*, *CHEAPER*, AND *SAFER* THAN MODERN MEDICINES.

The Limitations of Home Remedies

Some diseases are helped by home remedies. Others can be treated better with modern medicine. This is true for most serious infections. Sicknesses like pneumonia, tetanus, typhoid, tuberculosis, appendicitis, diseases caused by sexual contact, and fever after giving birth should be treated with modern medicines as soon as possible. For these diseases, do not lose time trying to treat them first with home remedies only.

It is sometimes hard to be sure which home remedies work well and which do not. More careful studies are needed. For this reason:

It is often safer to treat very serious illnesses with modern medicine—following the advice of a health worker if possible.

Old Ways and New

Some modern ways of meeting health needs work better than old ones. But at times the older, traditional ways are best. For example, traditional ways of caring for children or old people are often kinder and work better than some newer, less personal ways.

Not many years ago everyone thought that mother's milk was the best food for a young baby. They were right! Then the big companies that make canned and artificial milk began to tell mothers that bottle feeding was better. This is not true, but many mothers believed them and started to bottle feed their babies. As a result, thousands of babies have suffered and died needlessly from infection or hunger. For the reasons **breast is best**, see p. 271.

Respect your people's traditions and build on them.

For more ideas for building on local traditions, see *Helping Health Workers Learn*, Chapter 7.

BELIEFS THAT CAN MAKE PEOPLE WELL

Some home remedies have a direct effect on the body. Others seem to work only because people believe in them. **The healing power of belief can be very strong.**

For example, I once saw a man who suffered from a very bad headache. To cure him, a woman gave him a small piece of yam, or sweet potato. She told him it was a strong painkiller. He believed her—and the pain went away quickly.

It was his faith in her treatment, and not the yam itself, that made him feel better.

Many home remedies work in this way. They help largely because people have faith in them. For this reason, they are **especially useful to cure illnesses that are partly in people's minds, or those caused in part by a person's beliefs, worry, or fears.**

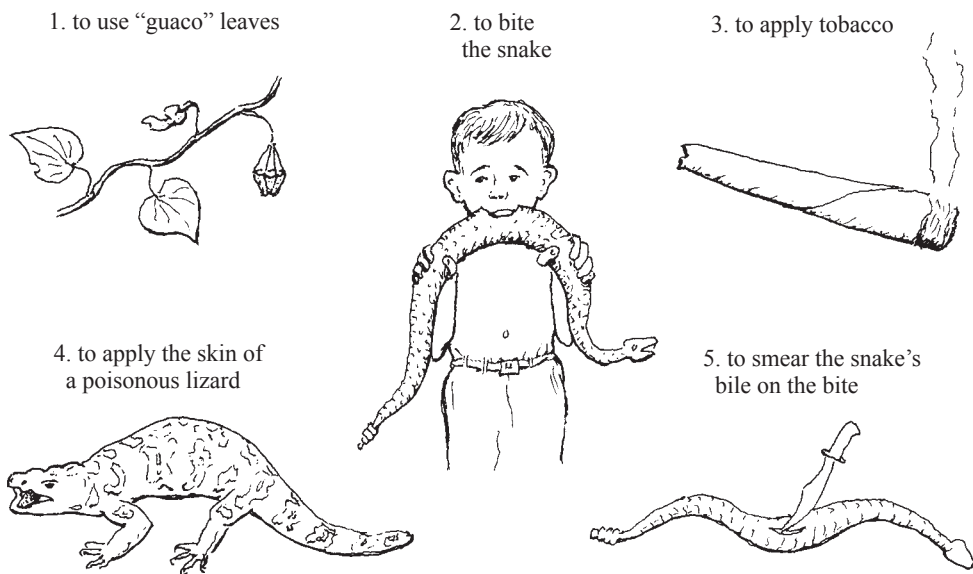


Included in this group of sicknesses are: bewitchment or hexing, unreasonable or hysterical fear, uncertain “aches and pains” (especially in persons going through stressful times), and anxiety or nervous worry. Also included are some cases of asthma, hiccups, indigestion, stomach ulcers, migraine headaches, and even warts.

For all of these problems, **the manner or “touch” of the healer can be very important.** What it often comes down to is showing you care, helping the sick person believe he will get well, or simply helping him relax.

Sometimes a person's belief in a remedy can help with problems that have completely physical causes.

For example, Mexican villagers have the following home cures for poisonous snakebite:



In other lands people have their own snakebite remedies—often many different ones. As far as we know, **none of these home remedies has any direct effect against snake poison.** The person who says that a home remedy kept a snake's poison from harming him at all was probably bitten by a non-poisonous snake!

Yet any of these home remedies may do some good if a person believes in it. If it makes him less afraid, his pulse will slow down, he will move and tremble less, and as a result, the poison will spread through his body more slowly. So there is less danger!

But the benefit of these home remedies for snakebite is limited. In spite of their common use, many people still become very ill or die. As far as we know:

No home cure for poisonous bites (whether from snakes, scorpions, spiders, or other poisonous animals) has much effect beyond that of the healing power of belief.

For snakebite it is usually better to use modern treatment. Be prepared: obtain antitoxins (also called *antivenoms* or "serums") for poisonous bites **before** you need them (see p. 389). Do not wait until it is too late.

BELIEFS THAT CAN MAKE PEOPLE SICK

The power of belief can help heal people. But it can also harm them. If a person believes strongly enough that something will hurt him, his own fear can make him sick. For example:



Once I was called to see a woman who had just had a *miscarriage* and was still bleeding a little. There was an orange tree near her house. So I suggested she drink a glass of orange juice. (Oranges have vitamin C which helps strengthen blood vessels.) She drank it—even though she was afraid it would harm her.

Her fear was so great that soon she became very ill. I examined her, but could find nothing physically wrong. I tried to comfort her, telling her she was not in danger. But she said she was going to die. At last I gave her an injection of distilled (completely pure) water. Distilled water has no medical effect. But since she had great faith in injections, she quickly got better.

Actually, the juice did not harm her. What harmed her was her **belief that it would make her sick**. And what made her well was her faith in injections!

In this same way, many persons go on believing false ideas about witchcraft, injections, diet, and many other things. Much needless suffering is the result.

Perhaps, in a way, I had helped this woman. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I had also wronged her; I had led her to believe things that were not true.

I wanted to set this right. So a few days later, when she was completely well, I went to her home and apologized for what I had done. I tried to help her understand that not the orange juice, but her **fear** had made her so sick. And that not the injection of water, but her **freedom from fear** had helped her get well.

By understanding the truth about the orange, the injection, and the tricks of her own mind, perhaps this woman and her family will become freer from fear and better able to care for their health in the future. For **health** is closely related to **understanding** and **freedom from fear**.

Many things do harm only because people believe they are harmful.

WITCHCRAFT—BLACK MAGIC—AND THE EVIL EYE

If a person believes strongly enough that someone has the power to harm him, he may actually become ill. Anyone who believes he is bewitched or has been given the *evil eye* is really the victim of his own fears (see *Susto*, p. 24).

A “witch” has no power over other people, except for her ability to make them believe that she has. For this reason:

It is impossible to bewitch a person who does not believe in witchcraft.



Some people think that they are “bewitched” when they have strange or frightening illnesses (such as *tumors* of the *genitals* or cirrhosis of the liver, see p. 328). Such sicknesses have nothing to do with witchcraft or black magic. Their causes are natural.

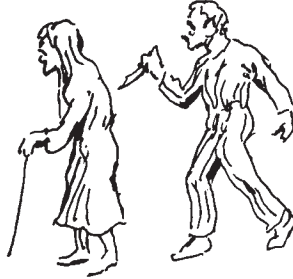
Do not waste your money at “magic centers” that claim to cure witchcraft. And do not seek revenge against a witch, because it will not solve anything. If you are seriously ill, go for medical help.

If you have a strange sickness:	do not blame a witch,	do not go to a magic center.	but ask for medical advice.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SOME FOLK BELIEFS AND HOME REMEDIES

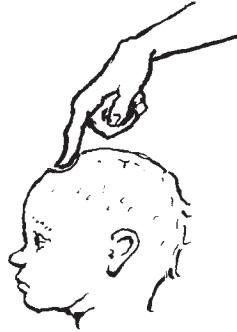
These examples are from the mountains of Mexico, the area that I know best. Perhaps some of the beliefs of your people are similar. Think about ways to learn which beliefs in your area lead to better health and which do not.

When people think someone is bewitched, is it true that he will get well if his relatives harm or kill the witch?



FALSE! No one is ever helped by harming someone else.

Is it true that when the soft spot on top of a baby's head sinks inward this means the baby will die of diarrhea unless he gets special treatment?



This is often true. The soft spot sinks because the baby has lost too much liquid (see p. 151). Unless he gets more liquid soon, he may die (see p. 152).

Is it true that if the light of the eclipsing moon falls on a pregnant mother, her child will be born with disabilities?



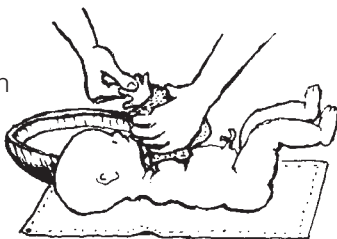
This is not true! But children may have disabilities present at birth if the mother does not use iodized salt, if she takes certain medicines, or for other reasons (see p. 318).

Is it true that mothers should give birth in a darkened room?



It is true that soft light is easier on the eyes of both the mother and the newborn child. But there should be enough light for the midwife to see what she is doing.

Is it true that a newborn baby should not be bathed until the cord falls off?



True! The stump of the cord should be kept dry until it falls off. But the baby can be gently cleaned with a clean, soft, damp cloth.

How many days after giving birth should a mother wait before she bathes?



A mother should wash with warm water the **day after giving birth**. The custom of not bathing for weeks following birth can lead to infections.

Is it true that traditional breastfeeding is better than “modern” bottle feeding?



TRUE! Breast milk is better food and also helps protect the baby against infection.

What foods should women avoid in the first few weeks after giving birth?



In the weeks following birth, women should not avoid any nutritious foods. Instead, they should eat plenty of fruit, vegetables, meat, milk, eggs, whole grains, and beans (see p. 276).

Is it a good idea to bathe a sick person, or will it do him harm?



It is a good idea. Sick people should be bathed in warm water every day.

Is it true that oranges, guavas, and other fruits are harmful when one has a cold or a fever?



NO! All fruits and juices are helpful when one has a cold or fever. They do not cause congestion or harm of any kind.

Is it true that when a person has a high fever, he should be wrapped up so that the air will not harm him?



NO! When a person has a high fever, take off all covers and clothing. Let the air reach his body. This will help the fever go down (see p. 76).

Is it true that tea made from willow bark will help bring fever down and stop pain?



True. It helps. Willow bark has a natural medicine in it very much like aspirin.

SUNKEN FONTANEL OR SOFT SPOT

The fontanel is the soft spot on the top of a newborn baby's head. It is where the bones of his skull have not formed completely. It usually takes a year to a year and a half for the soft spot to close completely.

Mothers in different lands realize that when the soft spot sinks inward their babies are in danger. They have many beliefs to explain this. In Latin America mothers think the baby's brains have slipped downward. They try to correct this by sucking on the soft spot, by pushing up on the roof of the mouth, or by holding the baby upside down and slapping his feet. This does not help because... **A sunken soft spot is really caused by dehydration** (see p. 151).

This means **the child is losing more liquid than he is drinking**. He is too dry—usually because he has diarrhea, or diarrhea with vomiting.

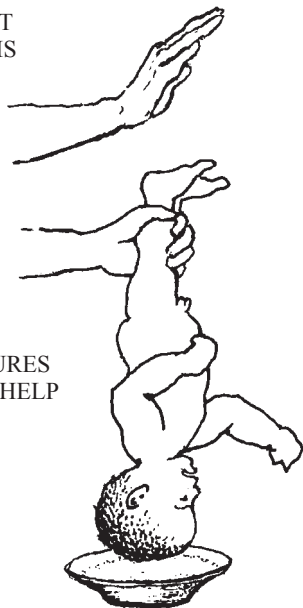


Treatment:

1. Give the child plenty of liquid: Rehydration Drink (see p. 152), breast milk, or boiled water.
2. If necessary, treat the causes of the diarrhea and vomiting (see p. 152 to 161). For most diarrheas, medicine is not needed, and may do more harm than good.

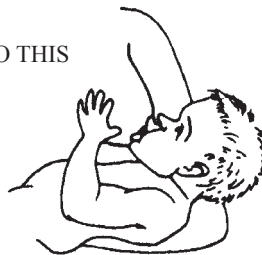
TO CURE A SUNKEN SOFT SPOT.

DO NOT
DO THIS

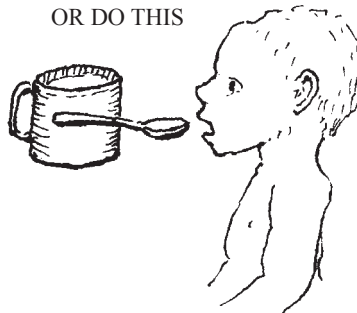


(MAGIC CURES
WILL NOT HELP
EITHER)

DO THIS



OR DO THIS



Note: If the soft spot is swollen or bulges **upward**, this may be a sign of meningitis. Begin treatment at once (see p. 185), and get medical help.

WAYS TO TELL IF A HOME REMEDY WORKS

Because a lot of people use a home cure does not necessarily mean it works well or is safe. It is often hard to know which remedies are helpful and which may be harmful. Careful study is needed to be sure. Here are four rules to help tell which remedies are least likely to work, or are dangerous. (Examples are from Mexican villages.)

1. THE MORE REMEDIES THERE ARE FOR ANY ONE ILLNESS, THE LESS LIKELY IT IS THAT ANY OF THEM WORKS.

For example: In rural Mexico there are **many** home remedies for goiter, **none** of which does any real good. Here are some of them:

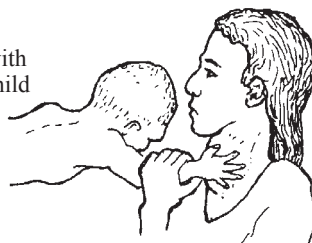
1. to tie a crab on the goiter

DON'T



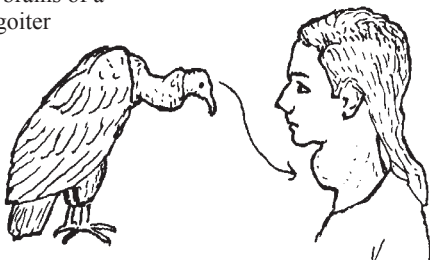
2. to rub the goiter with the hand of a dead child

DON'T



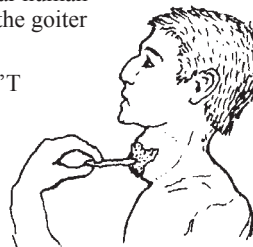
3. to smear the brains of a vulture on the goiter

DON'T



4. to smear human feces on the goiter

DON'T



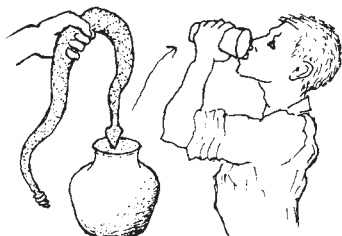
Not one of these many remedies works. If it did, the others would not be needed. **When a sickness has just one popular cure, it is more likely to be a good one.** For prevention and treatment of goiter use iodized salt (p. 130).

2. FOUL OR DISGUSTING REMEDIES ARE NOT LIKELY TO HELP—AND ARE OFTEN HARMFUL.

For example:

1. the idea that leprosy can be cured by a drink made of rotting snakes

DON'T



2. the idea that syphilis can be cured by eating a vulture

DON'T



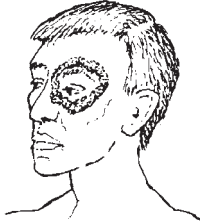
These two remedies do not help at all. The first one can cause dangerous infections. Belief in remedies like these sometimes causes delay in getting proper medical care.

3. REMEDIES THAT USE ANIMAL OR HUMAN WASTE DO NO GOOD AND CAN CAUSE DANGEROUS INFECTIONS. NEVER USE THEM.

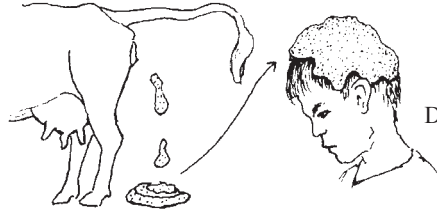
Examples:

1. Putting human feces around the eye does not cure blurred vision and can cause infections.

DON'T!



2. Smearing cow dung on the head to fight ringworm can cause tetanus and other dangerous infections.



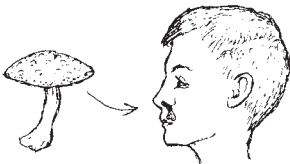
DON'T!

Also, the droppings of rabbits or other animals do not help heal burns. To use them is very dangerous. Cow dung, held in the hand, cannot help control seizures. Teas made from human, pig, or any other animal feces do not cure anything. They can make people sicker. **Never** put feces on the navel of a newborn baby. This can cause tetanus.

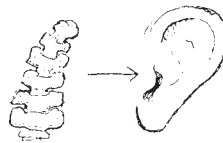
4. THE MORE A REMEDY RESEMBLES THE SICKNESS IT IS SAID TO CURE, THE MORE LIKELY ITS BENEFITS COME ONLY FROM THE POWER OF BELIEF.

The association between each of the following illnesses and its remedy is clear in these examples from Mexico:

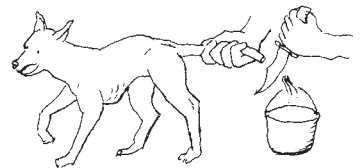
1. for a nosebleed, using *yesca* (a bright red mushroom)



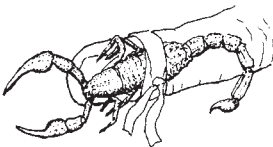
2. for deafness, putting powdered rattlesnake's rattle in the ear



3. for dog bite, drink tea made from the dog's tail



4. for scorpion sting, tying a scorpion against the stung finger



5. to prevent diarrhea when a child is teething, putting a necklace of snake's fangs around the baby's neck



6. to "bring out" the rash of measles, making tea from kapok bark



These remedies, and many other similar ones, have no curative value in themselves. They may be of some benefit if people believe in them. But for serious problems, be sure their use does not delay more effective treatment.

MEDICINAL PLANTS

Many plants have curative powers. Some of the best modern medicines are made from wild herbs.

Nevertheless, not all curative herbs people use have medical value... and those that have are sometimes used the wrong way. Try to learn about the herbs in your area and find out which ones are worthwhile.



CAUTION: Some medicinal herbs are very poisonous if taken in more than the recommended dose. For this reason it is often safer to use modern medicine, since the dosage is easier to control.

Here are a few examples of plants that can be useful if used correctly:

ANGEL'S TRUMPET (*Brugmansia arborea*)

The leaves of this and certain other members of the nightshade family contain a drug that helps to calm intestinal cramps, stomach-aches, and even gallbladder pain.

Grind up 1 or 2 leaves of Angel's Trumpet and soak them for a day in 7 tablespoons (100 ml) of water.

Dosage: Between 10 and 15 drops every 4 hours (adults only).

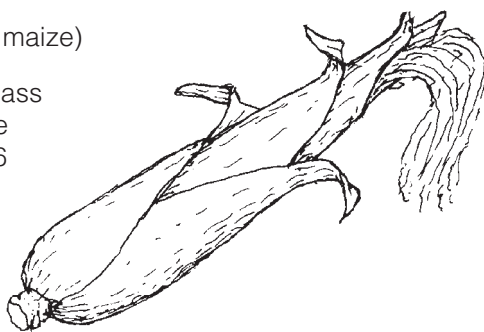


WARNING: Angel's Trumpet is very poisonous if you take more than the recommended dose.

CORN SILK (the tassels or "silk" from an ear of maize)

A tea made from corn silk makes a person pass more urine. This can help reduce swelling of the feet—especially in pregnant women (see p. 176 and 248).

Boil a large handful of corn silk in water and drink 1 or 2 glasses. It is not dangerous.



GARLIC

A drink made from garlic may help get rid of pinworms.

Chop finely, or crush, 4 cloves of garlic and mix with 1 glass of liquid (water, juice, or milk).

Dosage: Drink 1 glass daily for 3 weeks.

To treat vaginal infections with garlic, see p. 241 and 242.



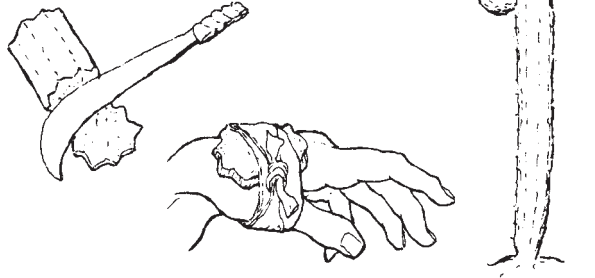
CARDON CACTUS (*Pachycereus pecten-aboriginum*)

Cactus juice can be used to clean wounds when there is no boiled water and no way to get any. Cardon cactus also helps stop a wound from bleeding, because the juice makes the cut blood vessels squeeze shut.

Cut a piece of the cactus with a clean knife and press it firmly against the wound.

When the bleeding is under control, tie a piece of the cactus to the wound with a strip of cloth.

After 2 or 3 hours, take off the cactus and clean the wound with boiled water and soap. There are more instructions on how to care for wounds and control bleeding on pages 82 to 87.



ALOE VERA (*Sabila*)

Aloe vera can be used to treat minor burns and wounds. The thick, slimy juice inside the plant calms pain and itching, aids healing, and helps prevent infection. Cut off a piece of the plant, peel back the outer layer, and apply the fleshy leaf or juice directly to the burn or wound.

Aloe can also help treat stomach ulcers and gastritis. Chop the spongy leaves into small pieces, soak them in water overnight, and then drink one glass of the slimy, bitter liquid every 2 hours.



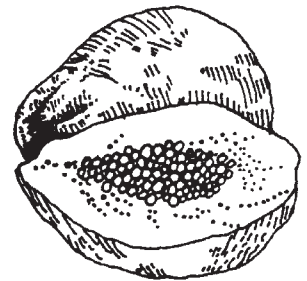
PAPAYA

Ripe papayas are rich in vitamins and also aid digestion. Eating them is especially helpful for weak or old people who complain of upset stomach when they eat meat, chicken, or eggs. Papaya makes these foods easier to digest.

Papaya can also help get rid of intestinal worms, although modern medicines work better. Collect 3 or 4 teaspoons (15-20 ml) of the "milk" that comes out when the green fruit or trunk of the tree is cut. Mix this with an equal amount of sugar or honey and stir it into a cup of hot water. If possible, drink along with a laxative.

Even better, dry and crush to a powder the papaya seeds. Take 3 teaspoons mixed with 1 glass water or some honey 3 times a day for 7 days.

Papayas can also be used for treating pressure sores. The fruit contains chemicals that help soften and make dead flesh easier to remove. First clean and wash out a pressure sore that has dead flesh in it. Then soak a sterile cloth or gauze with "milk" from the trunk or green fruit of a papaya plant and pack this into the sore. Repeat cleaning and repacking 3 times a day.



HOMEMADE CASTS TO KEEP BROKEN BONES IN PLACE

In Mexico several different plants such as *tepeguaje* (a tree of the bean family) and *solda con solda* (a huge, tree-climbing arum lily) are used to make casts. However, any plant will do if a syrup can be made from it that will dry hard and firm and will not irritate the skin. In India, traditional bone-setters make casts using a mixture of egg whites and herbs instead of a syrup made from plant juices. But the method is similar. Try out different plants in your area.

For a cast using tepeguaje: Put 1 kilogram of the bark into 5 liters of water and boil until only 2 liters are left. Strain and boil until a thick syrup is formed. Dip strips of flannel or clean sheet in the syrup and carefully use as follows.

Make sure the bones are in a good position (p. 98).

Do **not** put the cast directly against the skin.

Wrap the arm or leg in a soft cloth.

Then follow with a layer of cotton or wild kapok.

Finally, put on the wet cloth strips so that they form a cast that is firm but not too tight.

Most doctors recommend that the cast cover the joint above and the joint below the break, to keep the broken bones from moving.

This would mean that, for a broken wrist, the cast should cover almost the whole arm, like this:

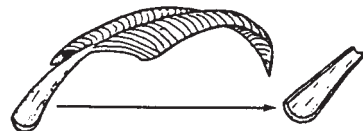
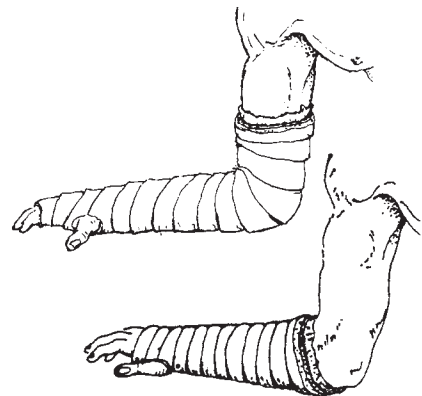
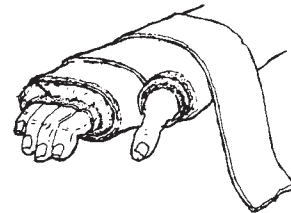
Leave the finger tips uncovered so that you can see if they keep a good color.

However, traditional bone-setters in China and Latin America use a short cast on a simple break of the arm saying that a little movement of the bone-ends speeds healing. Recent scientific studies have proven this to be true.

A temporary leg or arm splint can be made of cardboard, folded paper, or the thick curved stem of dried banana leaf, or palm leaf.

CAUTION: Even if the cast is not very tight when you put it on, the broken limb may swell up later. If the person complains that the cast is too tight, or if his fingers or toes become cold, white, or blue, take the cast off and put on a new, looser one.

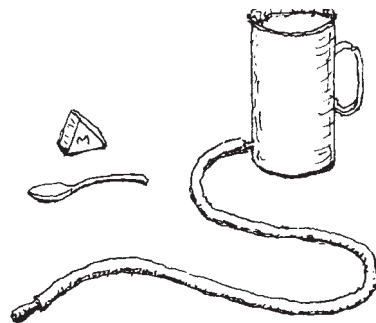
Never put on a cast over a cut or a wound.



ENEMAS, LAXATIVES, AND PURGES: WHEN TO USE THEM AND WHEN NOT TO

Many people give enemas and take laxatives far too often. The “urge to purge” is worldwide.

Enemas and purges are very popular home cures. And they are often very harmful. Many people believe fever and diarrhea can be “washed out” by giving an **enema** (running water into the gut through the anus) or by using a **purge**, or strong laxative. Unfortunately, such efforts to clean or purge the sick body often cause more injury to the already damaged gut.



**Rarely do enemas or laxatives do any good at all.
Often they are dangerous—especially strong laxatives.**

CASES IN WHICH IT IS DANGEROUS TO USE ENEMAS OR LAXATIVES

Never use an enema or laxative if a person has a severe stomach-ache or any other sign of appendicitis or acute abdomen (see p. 93), even if he passes days without a bowel movement.

Never give an enema or laxative to a person with a bullet wound or other injury to the gut.

Never give a strong laxative to a weak or sick person. It will weaken him more.

Never give an enema or purge to a baby less than 2 years old.

Never give a laxative or purge to a child with high fever, vomiting, diarrhea or signs of dehydration (see p. 151). It can increase dehydration and kill the child.

Do not make a habit of using laxatives often (see Constipation, p. 126).

THE CORRECT USES OF ENEMAS

1. Simple enemas can help relieve constipation (dry, hard, difficult stools). Use warm water only.
2. When a person with severe vomiting is dehydrated, you can try replacing water by giving an enema of Rehydration Drink **very slowly** (see p. 152).

PURGES AND LAXATIVES THAT ARE OFTEN USED

CASTOR OIL SENNA LEAF CASCARA (cascara sagrada)	These are irritating purges that often do more harm than good. It is better not to use them.
MAGNESIUM HYDROXIDE MILK OF MAGNESIA EPSOM SALTS (magnesium sulfate) (see p. 382)	These are salt purges. Use them only in low doses, as laxative for constipation. Do not use them often and never when there is pain in the belly.
MINERAL OIL (see p. 382)	This is sometimes used for constipation in persons with piles...but it is like passing greased rocks. Not recommended.

CORRECT USES OF LAXATIVES

Laxatives are like purges but weaker. All the products listed above are laxatives when taken in small doses and purges when taken in large doses. Laxatives soften and hurry the bowel movement; purges cause diarrhea. Purges are always harmful, but laxatives can sometimes be used to relieve constipation.

One can use milk of magnesia or other magnesium salts in small doses, as laxatives, in some cases of constipation. People with *hemorrhoids* (piles, p. 175) who have constipation can take mineral oil but this only makes their stools slippery, not soft. The dose for mineral oil is 3 to 6 teaspoons at bedtime (never with a meal because the oil will rob the body of important vitamins in the food). This is not the best way.

Suppositories, or bullet-shaped pills that can be pushed up the rectum, can also be used to relieve constipation or piles (see pages 175, 384, and 393).

A BETTER WAY

The healthiest and most gentle way to have softer, more frequent stools is to drink a lot of water and to eat more foods with lots of natural fiber, or “roughage” like cassava, yam, or bran (wheat husks) and other whole grain cereals (see p. 126). Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables also helps.

People who traditionally eat lots of food with natural fiber suffer much less from piles, constipation, and cancer of the gut than do people who eat a lot of refined “modern” foods. For better bowel habits, avoid refined foods and eat foods prepared from unpolished or unrefined grains.