

Mom knows best : Residents recall old home remedies for cold and flu

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Not feeling well?

Rub mustard on your chest.

Or eat some matzo ball soup, put Vicks VapoRub on your feet, drink hot lemonade with a shot of whiskey or get out the goose grease.

Just in time for cold and flu season, we asked Santa Barbara County residents, including those living at retirement communities, to share folk remedies from their childhood. They smiled and chuckled as they reflected on the old-time "cures," but swore most of them seemed to work.

Goleta resident Carmen Rouse, who's healthy and happy at 79, will never forget the goose grease. She said her mother rubbed her and her sisters' backs and chests with the warm ointment. "What tickles my funny-bone memory? The dogs, who suddenly become our affectionate lap buddies!"

Such remedies inspire lifetime memories and laughs, but there seems to be more to home treatments than that. Dr. Daniel Brennan, a Sansum Clinic pediatrician in Santa Barbara, said they may relieve symptoms: You become less congested, or your throat is less irritated, although it takes time and rest to get over a cold or the flu.

Dr. Lizzie Clapham, a Santa Barbara holistic physician, said home remedies can help the body heal faster. "It goes back to the beginning of time and people learning to heal themselves before medical care."

Both doctors approve of some old-fashioned remedies such as gargling with salt water, taking a hot bath and drinking tea with honey to ease various cold symptoms. Wood Glen Hall resident Shirley Wadley, 89, recalled her mother having her gargle with salt water.

"As general advice, gargling with warm hot water is a soothing thing," Dr. Brennan said.



Marjorie Shore



Alice Scott



George Scott



Susie Qualls



Cheryl Keyes



Hal Chansky



Kathy Chalfant



Nancy Barnes



Flora Vernon



Fathunah Alford



Shirley Wadley



Dorothy Page

And remedies don't have to be unpleasant. Just ask Nancy Barnes, 77, a retired manicurist and bookkeeper living at Wood Glen Hall: "My mom used to give me hot lemonade with a shot of whiskey" for a cold.

Did it work? "I guess it did because she kept doing it!" she said, laughing. "And I didn't turn out to be an alcoholic!"

Several residents were quick to point out whiskey. "When I had a cold, I got hot lemonade with whiskey and honey," said Alice Scott, 80, a retired nurse living at Valle Verde. "It felt very good. I used it on my kids; it seemed to work."

Sitting next to her, Dr. George Scott, 83, her husband and a retired physician, elaborated — with a wicked grin. "The answer for the cold is you put a hat on one of the posts (of your bed). Drink whiskey until (you see) there's a hat on both posts, and that cures the cold!" He laughed.

But seriously, folks, local physicians recommend against alcoholic beverages as a remedy.

Dr. Brennan said alcohol causes excess urination and dehydrates the body; patients need to be hydrated.

"I would recommend herbal tea with honey as something that would be effective" to treat one particular cold symptom — a sore throat, he said.

That idea gets a thumbs up from Cheryl Keyes, 84, a retired nurse's assistant living at Garden Court. "It relieves the symptoms."

Back at Wood Glen Hall, Flora Vernon, 90, who used to run a Santa Barbara fabric store, recalled how her mother took care of her and her 11 siblings. "She didn't have time or the money for doctors. So she put us to bed or gave us a hot bath to sweat it out."

Mom knew best, Dr. Brennan said. "That (a hot bath) is one of our most common and recommended home remedies. That fits in the category of what steam and moist air do. For most people who have colds, if they have nasal congestion, it will help to break up the mucus."

Residents frequently mentioned — what else? — Vicks VapoRub as a remedy to relieve congestion.

"Grandma would put Vicks on my chest and under my nose and on my back," Garden Court resident Susie Qualls, 70, a retired day care worker, recalled.

That's common, but there are variations.

Also at Garden Court, resident Hal Chansky, 86, recalled putting a towel over his head and breathing in steaming hot water that contained a tablespoon of Vicks VapoRub. "It opens up your nasal passages," said the retired housing authority tenant coordinator. He added he has avoided getting colds by keeping his head warm by always wearing a hat or baseball cap. "I don't

take the flu shots. I never get the flu."

Fellow resident Fathunah Alford, 82, recalled this remedy to stop children from coughing at night: Rub Vicks VapoRub on the bottom of the feet and pull up the socks. "Then in five minutes, no more coughing. They go right back to sleep. It works like magic."

Holistic physician Dr. Clapham and Dr. Kristi Wrightson, a Santa Barbara naturopathic doctor and registered dietitian, suggested an alternative: Put on a pair of wet socks, but stay warm. Dr. Clapham said it increases circulation and helps the body heal faster. (See sidebar.)

Wood Glen Hall resident Dorothy Page, a retired musician, recalled how her mother gave her brother a little kerosene with sugar for croup, a respiratory problem marked by a barking cough.

FYI, doctors say not to give your kids kerosene.

It's better to give them food. Garden Court resident Marjorie Shore, 89, a retired librarian, remembered how her upset stomach would feel better if she ate toasted rye bread and cottage cheese.

At Valle Verde, Kathy Chalfant, 79, a retired fourth-grade teacher, recalled a remedy that brought her to tears, not that she's feeling sentimental. "If you had a bad cold, (my grandmother) would make an onion poultice (a soft, moist salve that she put on the chest). It had mustard in it. It was horrendous. I don't think it did any good, but it did make you cry. Maybe that cleared out the system."

She's not alone. Other mothers have rubbed mustard on their kids to relieve congestion and coughing.

"Some 70 years later, I can still smell it!" said Nancy Hawks, 76, a Goleta resident, about the mustard plaster her mother put on her chest when she was 7 or 8. "It burned a bit, and the odor sure took my mind off my runny nose and cough."

Never mind the stench; Mom knew best. A mustard plaster is effective in reducing coughing, and mustard and onions have anti-inflammatory properties, according to Dr. Clapham.

Kirk Morley, 56, a Santa Barbara carpenter, recalled how his mother treated his earaches by heating up cooking oil in a teaspoon over the stove. She poured the oil into his ear. "Then she would stick a ball of cotton in there and say, 'You're fine,' and send us off to school!"

Daryl West of Goleta said her grandparents from Russia and Poland used a cold remedy linked to her Jewish heritage: matzo ball soup. "This soup is my comfort food and that of my children."

In fact, it looks like you can benefit from another famous broth.

Said Dr. Wrightson, "There's a lot of research that found chicken noodle soup has medicinal properties. It is anti-inflammatory and soothes the mucus membranes."

Our moms already knew that.

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THE WET SOCK TREATMENT

Dr. Kristi Wrightson, a Santa Barbara naturopathic doctor and registered dietitian, recommends this to clients as a possible treatment for sore throat or inflammation or infection of the throat; neck pain; ear infections; headaches; migraines; nasal congestion; upper respiratory infections; coughs; bronchitis; and sinus infections. As always, check with your doctor to find what's right for you.

1. Soak a pair of cotton socks completely with cold water. Be sure to wring the socks out thoroughly.
2. Warm your feet by soaking them in warm water or a warm bath for five to 10 minutes.
3. Dry off feet and body with a dry towel.
4. Place cold wet socks on feet. Cover with thick wool socks. Go directly to bed. Don't get chilled.
5. Keep the socks on overnight. The wet cotton socks will be dry in the morning.

The treatment increases circulation and decreases congestion in the upper respiratory passages, head and throat, and it relieves pain and increases healing during acute infections, Dr. Wrightson said. She added it helps patients sleep better.