

## **The Sweet Medical History of Peppermint**

As Christmas approaches, candy canes are everywhere to be found. The sweet and cooling taste of peppermint brings many of us back to simpler, comforting times. But the healing properties of peppermint are more than just sentimental. Humans have been using peppermint oil as a medicine for centuries.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans were some of the earliest to use peppermint oil as a medicine. Here, mint was just as likely to adorn a walkway as it was to be given as a digestive aid. It was also in Ancient civilization where mint arrived at its modern name, *Mentha piperita*, through the tale of a magical love triangle involving nymphs and a Greek god.

The Romans brought peppermint to Europe, where its medical uses expanded to include relief of headaches, itching, and insomnia. The Europeans also developed creative ways to use mint, from teas, elixirs, and topical lotions.

It was most likely here that the candy cane was born. A sweet and aromatic combination, the candy cane was both a treat and a medicine. In these earlier times, pharmacists used to hide the flavor of bitter “medicines” with sugar and spices. Peppermint was a unique example, where the flavoring was the medicine.

Over time, peppermint spread across the world. Most of the world’s supply is grown in the United States, where Michigan is the largest producer.

### **We still use peppermint oil medically for many ailments including...**

1. Cramps and bloating
2. Digestive upsets after eating
3. Irritable bowel syndrome
4. Bowel urgency
5. Menstrual cramps
6. Headaches
7. Gas
8. Nausea

The difference is that now we have a better scientific understanding of how it works. Peppermint oil has many active compounds that provide relief for discomfort. Many of these act to relax the muscles of the intestines that cause cramps. When the intestinal muscles contract very hard, termed a spasm, this leads to pain. It also can give rise to that unpleasant sensation that you have to run to the bathroom after eating a meal or while experiencing a stressful situation. Peppermint oil is a natural potent relaxer of these spasms. Although there are prescription medications that can do the same thing, these often have bad side-effects including confusion and a dry mouth. This is one of the big reasons that many

doctors are recommending peppermint oil as opposed to prescriptions as a first-line therapy for these pains.

Peppermint oil also acts to block pain that comes from a certain type of cell receptor called TRPM8.

This receptor helps the body sense pain, mainly from temperature. It is why you get that cooling sensation in your mouth after eating peppermint. In the colon, it turns out this receptor signals pain, when it is triggered by certain foods. Peppermint oil can help blunt this pain that can accompany a meal.

**For those of you interested in trying peppermint oil, there are several forms available.**

1. Peppermint tea. I usually recommend finding pure peppermint tea leaves and brewing the cup double strong. This is one of the weakest forms of peppermint oil, but it tends to help those with mild symptoms who enjoy sipping tea throughout the day.
2. Peppermint oil. I am often reluctant to recommend this as it will burn your mouth if you don't dilute it properly. If you choose to use it, put no more than 2 drops into an 8 oz cup of water and drink it slowly.
3. Peppermint tummydrops. Clinically designed to get peppermint oil into your system right away. They taste great and are convenient.
4. Peppermint capsules. These are designed to release peppermint oil into your intestines. This can help out if peppermint tends to cause you acid reflux or stomach burning. The down-side is that if you are having a symptom right now, you'll have to wait hours for it to kick in.

Hopefully this article has inspired you to pause just a moment the next time you see a candy cane, and reflect on the fascinating history of peppermint.

Happy Holidays Everyone. Thank you as always for reading.

**The Tummy Doc**



**the tummy doc**

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Dustin G. James, MD

Board Certified Gastroenterologist and Internist

Author of The Complete Idiot's Guide® to Digestive Health

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