

Mint

by Ann Gerhardt, MD

August 2016

There are a variety of mint plant species, also known as mentha, including various mints, peppermints, spearmints and pennyroyals. In addition to their use as food flavors, they are frequent ingredients of over-the-counter remedies, room deodorizers and aromatherapy.

Mint contains menthol, which has a cooling effect when inhaled or rubbed on the skin (e.g. Vicks Vaporub and lip balms). It does this by stimulating cold receptors, producing a cold sensation without actually changing the temperature. Thus it feels good on cracked lips, sunburn or razor burn.

Menthol is an analgesic. It activates opioid receptors (like opiate narcotics) and acts on nerve fibers (in a manner similar to the sedative Propofol) to reduce pain. It is used in inhaled products for colds and inflamed sinuses and on skin for minor wounds and pains. For similar reasons, cigarette manufacturers add it to cigarettes to reduce smoke irritation.

It also slows muscle contractions, which might reduce spasm in injured muscle. Blocking spasm and its analgesic effects make it a good ingredient for muscle strain creams, minor aches and cramps, often in combination with camphor, methyl salicylate (a relative of aspirin), capsaicin and/or eucalyptus.

When applied directly to a wound, it is somewhat anti-bacterial. Applying it to a rash might reduce the risk of infection. Dentists use it to reduce post-procedure infections. There is no evidence that consuming mint orally will influence the immune system or prevent infections.

While some use mint to treat allergies because of its purported anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant

properties, it can also cause significant allergic symptoms. It has no specific anti-histamine effect.

Traditional medicine practitioners use mint to treat stomach ache, nausea, indigestion, chest pain and irritable bowel syndrome. Unfortunately, mint also opens the sphincter between the esophagus and stomach, thereby possibly contributing to heartburn and acid reflux. An overdose of peppermint causes nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain among other symptoms: If it was being used to treat those symptoms in the first place and an overdose makes them worse, upping the dose to get control could spiral into serious problems.

In addition to gastrointestinal side effects, excessive menthol can cause slowed breathing and heart rate, kidney failure, seizures, depression, twitching, dizziness, incoordination and unconsciousness. A perfect example of 'too much of a good thing.'