

Mints are cool

The flavor of mint is familiar to us through candy canes and gum, mint juleps and schnapps, jelly, tea and the Middle Eastern dish *tabbouleh*. Candies flavored with mint have even absorbed the name—mints. And while its culinary uses shine, there is an extensive history of use for medicinal purposes both in the West as well as in Asia, along with growing modern scientific evidence of therapeutic value.

While the mint family includes about 20 true species, because of hybridization there about 2300 named variations, half of which are synonyms, with the rest legitimate specific names. There are two species which have the most medicinal value—peppermint (*Mentha piperata*) and field mint (*Mentha haplocalyx Briq.*). Peppermint probably originated in Europe as a hybrid of spearmint and water mint. It is the species widely grown and consumed in the United States. The haplocalyx species, field mint, is a major herb in traditional Chinese medicine. Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), since it has far less of the active ingredient menthol, is primarily esteemed as a flavoring agent which some prefer to peppermint. Other mints were used by North American native tribes medicinally and non-medicinally. For example, the Meskwaki and the Winnebago, used mountain mint or horsemint to mask odors of their traps, or as a lure.

The Latin genus name *Mentha*, common to all varieties of mint, is derived from the name of the mythological nymph Mintha of Mount Minthe in Elis, southern Greece who was loved by Haides. The story goes that when Mintha claimed to be superior to Haides' wife Persephone, she was trampled underfoot and transformed into a mint plant. Since mint is cooling by nature, the implication I suspect is that the resulting mint plant cooled the temper of the trampler.

The Western peppermint has long been a remedy for digestive problems in Europe and North America. It is no accident that mint jelly or sauce is often combined with lamb. Lamb is an extremely warming meat, and the mint has a cooling and relaxing effect on the digestive system. The tea can be helpful for mild nausea, gas and intestinal cramping. Modern scientific research provides moderate to good support for the effectiveness of mint oil for heartburn and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)—in the latter the oil must be taken with enteric coated capsules so it passes through to the intestine.

In traditional Chinese medicine, field mint—the Chinese version of peppermint—is part of several classical formulas which treat the early stages of colds, including symptoms of mild fever, sore throat, headache or excessive tearing. It is also often included in formulas to speed resolution of itchy skin rashes, including measles.

Mint tea generally causes no side effects. Use of the oil internally for heartburn or IBS should be undertaken under medical supervision since infrequently there can be side effects like heartburn or skin rash and the oil can interact with some medications. The oil should be avoided by those who are pregnant and the tea can reduce lactation in nursing mothers. Also avoid the oil if you have a hiatal hernia and use it only after consulting a doctor if you have gallstones. Don't apply the oil to the chest or nostrils of children under five as it can cause a choking sensation or skin irritation.

To make tea add 1 or 2 teaspoons dried mint to each 8 ounces of hot water, cover to hold in the volatile oils and let it steep a few minutes. If you use fresh mint use a small handful of leaves. Mint teabags are widely available in groceries. Teabags labeled Moroccan mint combine mint with green tea, and since green tea is also cooling these make a good combination. The strength and dosages of tinctures, oils and capsules varies so follow package directions carefully. Unfortunately, most after dinner mints actually contain very little mint oil so a cup of peppermint tea after dinner will be more helpful. Try growing mint. Its prolific and has a lovely pink or lilac flower. Imagine lemonade on a hot Ojai summer day with a sprig of fresh mint! Cool!

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