



green medicine

Are we still a drug-popping generation? Many of us probably think little of taking a tablet for a headache, upset stomach or when we're feeling run down with a cold or flu. Though few would argue that modern medicine has made enormous progress in helping us live longer and healthier lives, there are costs involved. One of which is the cost to the environment. Here, some steps you can take to help reduce ecological dis-ease.

WRITTEN BY SUSAN NEWHAM AND ELSIBE LOUBSER MCGUFFOG ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOBY NEWSOME

recycling 911

Before you drop off your old meds at the pharmacy where they will be whisked away, remember that there are financial costs involved in recycling. 'The disposal of pharmaceutical waste has to be handled with great care,' says Karin Mathews, Manager of BCL Medical Waste in Cape Town, who regularly collects medical waste from pharmacies. 'Any pharmaceuticals that have expired or have been damaged have to be destroyed, either via high temperature incineration or encapsulation (i.e. taken to designated, licensed landfill sites).' Both these processes are expensive and involve wading through red tape. It is therefore important to try to minimise this waste stream as much as possible (see more tips under 'Recycling Modern Medicine', opposite) and sort your medical waste carefully. Poisons and flammables can't be disposed of in an incinerator.

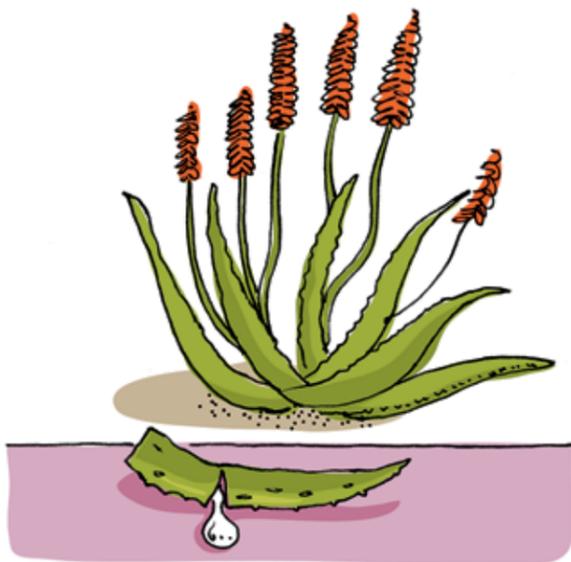
IRONICALLY, MOST MEDICINES originally came from the earth. Plants have always played an important role in medicine and were often discovered, through trial and error, to contain active healing properties. Our ancestors, for instance, noticed that their aches and pains disappeared when they drank tea made from the bark of a willow tree. Later, scientists found that willow bark contains salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin.

And though today most of these 'active ingredients' are synthetically produced, which means that the willow tree and many other natural resources remain unscathed, the production of modern medicines has other serious repercussions for the environment. For one, toxins used in the chemical synthesis of pharmaceuticals are harmful to the environment. The energy expenditure through medical trials and pharmaceutical production is necessary but problematic. And then there's the environmentally unfriendly packaging, distribution, marketing and disposal of medicines.

'The issue of green medicine is an underdeveloped arena of concern,' asserts Bobby Peek of Groundwork, an NGO in Pietermaritzburg that helps dispose of medical waste. Fact is, few of us are able to escape using medicine, but we can raise our awareness by considering the following options.

going herbal

Unofficial studies indicate the majority of South Africans use plant-based medicines, obtained from traditional healers or home-grown remedies. And that's good because the more natural the medicine, the more likely it is to be ecofriendly.



But herbal medicine is not necessarily green: think of natural remedies that have to be flown in from abroad, or the overfarming of herbal crops that decrease biodiversity, or harvesting in the wild that disturbs natural environments.

Growing natural medicines in your own ecofriendly garden is a sure way to control your carbon footprint. The chillies you may plant contain vitamin C to ward off colds, garlic serves as a natural antibiotic, and peppermint relieves nausea.

If you're not growing your own herbs or plant medicines, then purchasing herbal remedies or complementary medicines that are grown locally and packaged in recycled containers are a better bet than an imported product, because they have less of an impact on the environment. 'Complementary medicines are environmentally friendly if they're sourced from properly cultivated organic stock and not harvested from their wild habitats, as that would disrupt the ecosystem and deplete natural resources,' says Cape Town-based Dr Arien van der Merwe, health author and practitioner. 'And, because herbal remedies are natural, they're also biodegradable.'

Van der Merwe believes that once we choose to use complementary medicine, we become aware of the responsibility we all have for our own health and wellbeing. 'This leads to an awareness of the importance to keep balance in our bodies, minds and souls, as well as of course balance in our world, caring for, and protecting our environment with appreciation and gratitude for our natural resources'. It's a change of habit, but not always easy: when your body is saturated with medication, it could take longer for herbal treatments to work.

green medicine box

So, now that you're willing to try natural remedies, where to start? Allan Sakinofsky, a pharmacist and natural-health retailer in Cape Town suggests you consider the following products, which are available naturally or from pharmacies and health shops, and are good for the treatment of common ailments:

aloe vera Have this plant handy for wounds and all types of burns, including sunburn. Slice a leaf and apply the gel to the skin, or buy pure aloe vera gel.

arnica Used for bruises, sprains and sore muscles, this remedy is available in a cream or ointment, or can be given as a compress. Homeopathic arnica can also be taken orally.

calendula This herbal remedy is anti-inflammatory, astringent and antiseptic, and it inhibits bleeding. You can find it in an ointment form. Use it for cuts, scrapes, rashes and burns.



camomile This herb is an anti-inflammatory as well as a digestive aid. Drink it as a tea or apply directly onto the skin for rashes. For children, massage their stomachs with chamomile and fennel that's been mixed into a carrier oil, such as almond oil.

echinacea This immune booster is good to take when you're run down or to help prevent and fight colds and flu.

lavender oil A soothing remedy that helps heal burns or stings when mixed with a little aqueous cream. It's also known to calm frazzled nerves, so add a few drops added to your bath water.

rescue remedy This flower remedy can help ease feelings of shock or panic following a trauma. It can also help to alleviate general anxiety during times of stress.

st john's wort A herb most commonly used to help treat depression, it can also be taken after head injuries or puncture wounds, such as animal bites. It is important to bear in mind that St John's Wort decreases the efficacy of the contraceptive pill.

tea tree oil Mix one part tea tree oil with 10 parts water and use to wash wounds – this is a natural antiseptic. Tea tree oil can also be applied to insect bites to stop the itching.

tiger balm To treat muscle cramps and headaches, rub this ointment on the affected muscle or temples, but be careful to avoid the eyes.

recycling modern medicine

If you find herbal and complementary medicine hard pills to swallow, then you can still do the earth some good by considering the following:

disposing of drugs safely For years, we've flushed expired medication down the toilet, thinking it safer to do this than throwing it in the bin where it could run the risk of being found by children or pets. Unfortunately most sewage treatment plants aren't

designed to filter these drugs out and so the active ingredients found in medicines make their way into our rivers, dams and drinking water.

Expired medication should be returned to suppliers instead. Pharmacies, including the big chains, take back expired medicine, which are in turn collected by medical-waste companies who dispose of them in a responsible manner, usually by burning. Your local hospital or clinic is linked to the same disposal system. An incinerator burns at an extremely high temperature to be able to eliminate the toxic fumes, so don't consider doing it at home.

check the packaging The modern world is an overpackaged place, but before we campaign against blister packs, it's good to note that medicine is packaged the way it is to avoid contamination and to prolong shelf life. However, where possible, consider ecofriendly options, including reusable packaging like glass bottles, and recyclable packaging such as glass, card and paper. Biodegradable plastics are more environmentally friendly than the more traditional PVC plastics. Certain international homeopathic companies have a recyclable logo on their containers, so look out for these. If it's at all possible, recycle it.

waste not, want not 'As with all recycling efforts, purchasing and stocking fewer pills prevents having to dispose of them later,' says Lorraine Osman, spokesperson for the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa. Try not to stock up on medicine that you won't use. Also try to sort out the cause of your niggle before resorting to a quick medicine fix. As overly simplistic as it seems, your headache is possibly a result of dehydration or just plain tiredness. Purchase wisely: certain pharmacies will sell you drugs in smaller quantities. Buy fewer pills and rather go back for more. The basic principle? Don't stock up on more than you need. ■

salt of the earth

Tissue salts, also natural substances, are believed to be helpful for certain health conditions. The assumption is that disease comes about as a result of a deficiency of certain minerals in the body, such as magnesium or phosphate. By replacing the salts, symptoms should abate, says pharmacist Allan Sakinofsky. Consider buying local products made by companies such as Natura, Bioharmony and Homeoforce.

1 Calc Fluor Combats cracked skin, stretch marks, varicose veins and haemorrhoids.

2 Calc Phos Combats bone injuries, lethargy and recurrent illnesses.

3 Calc Sulph Combats slow-healing wounds and pimples.

4 Ferrum Phos Combats sore throats, mild pain, tonsillitis and dark rings under eyes.

5 Kali Mur Combats a blocked nose and colds with thick white mucus congestion.

6 Kali Phos Combats mild anxiety, nervous tension and nerve pain.

7 Kali Sulph Combats dry, scaly skin and sculp, eczema and a blocked nose with yellow discharge.

8 Mag Phos Combats colic babies, general and menstrual cramps and muscle spasms.

9 Nat Mur Combats diarrhoea, a runny nose, tendency to mild depression and tiredness.

10 Nat Phos Combats heartburn, arthritis, acid indigestion and gout.

11 Nat Sulph Combats nausea, flatulence, and liver conditions.

12 Silica Combats pimples, boils, styes, smelly feet, nail-biting tendencies and eliminating toxins.

PLEASE NOTE THAT REAL SIMPLE DOES NOT PROPOSE THE USE OF NATURAL REMEDIES TO THE EXCLUSION OF PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION. IF SYMPTOMS PERSIST, PLEASE CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR.