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The fighting power of Oregano

This versatile herb packs a powerful punch

When most people smell oregano, they think of one thing—pizza. The flavor and fragrance of this popular herb is inextricably associated with its use in flavoring tomato dishes, primarily of Italian cuisine. But while it adds a unique taste to Italian dishes, oregano has even greater value as a healing herb. Its medicinal qualities stem from the rich array of aromatic compounds in the essential oil.

Studies on the biological activity of oregano show a wide range of antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral and antioxidant properties for the essential oil and extracts. In recent years, oregano has moved from fame as a culinary herb into increasing popularity as a dietary supplement, sparked by interest in the essential oil through aromatherapy. Let's take a closer look at this fascinating plant—or more precisely—plant category that goes by the name oregano, especially common oregano (*Origanum vulgare*).

FROM TRADITIONAL TO TODAY

For centuries, oregano has been used as a folk medicine for everything from respiratory ailments to gastrointestinal complaints, from headaches to colds. Various pharmacological studies suggest that oregano and its essential oil are antibacterial, antifungal, expectorant, spasmolytic and diuretic in effect.

A series of recent studies by Harry G. Preuss, M.D. and colleagues at the Georgetown University Medical Center have shed light on future potential of oregano oil. His findings were presented at the American College of Nutrition's annual meeting in Orlando, Fla., in October, 2001. A test-tube study and follow-up using 18 mice separated into three different groups found that oregano oil had significant antibacterial activity against staphylococcus bacteria. And the oregano oil, in test tubes at relatively low doses, inhibited staph growth as effectively as standard antibiotics.

"While this investigation was performed only in test tubes and on a small number of mice, the preliminary results are promising and warrant further study," says Preuss. "The ability of oils from various spices to kill infectious organisms has been recognized since antiquity. Natural oils may turn out to be valuable adjuvants or even replacements for many anti-germicidals under a variety of conditions."

Another study presented at the same meeting combined edible oils from fenugreek, cumin, and pumpkin seed as well as oregano oil, and found that the oils may

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enhance insulin sensitivity and lower blood pressure in diabetic rats. According to Dr. Preuss, "Our results suggest that combinations of various edible oils improve glucose metabolism in these diabetic rats, and they may be important in the treatment of different forms of human diabetes, as well as the high blood pressure that often accompanies it. We are encouraged by the results of this small study and plan to conduct more research to try to find new ways to treat diabetes with fewer side effects."

A soon-to-be published study by Dr. Preuss and colleagues looked at the potential of oregano oil in *Candida albicans* (candida), and found that oregano

This small, human study provides the first evidence of antiparasitic effects of oregano oil in humans.

A TASTE OF OREGANO

Oregano oil can be ingested via a tea. Simply pour a quart of hot water over a tablespoonful of the finely ground herb, then drink as needed, perhaps sweetened with honey. For a bath, place four ounces of the finely cut herb in a cloth bag and steep in a full bath of hot water.

In European traditions, oregano oil is taken by placing five to six drops of the essential oil on a teaspoonful of sugar,

Studies suggest that oregano and its essential oil are antibacterial, antifungal, expectorant, spasmolytic and diuretic in effect.

demonstrated antifungal powers in these test-tube and experimental studies, against both systemic and skin infections.

Oregano has a rich tradition of historical use and recent use as a folk medicine, while the vast majority of scientific studies on oregano deal with its chemistry, quality and commercial production. Most studies looking at health benefits have been laboratory studies not involving humans or higher organisms.

However, a recently published preliminary clinical study on oregano and its effect on parasites was conducted by researchers at Health Explorations Trust, in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Biotics Research Corporation of Houston, Texas. Thirty-three adult patients with chronic gastrointestinal complaints and fatigue were tested for evidence of enteric parasites in their stools. Fourteen of the patients tested positive for one or more parasites, 13 of whom completed the study. For a six-week period they received four tablets of an emulsified oil of oregano, three times a day—600 mg of the emulsified oil daily.

taken two to three times daily.

Like many essential oils, oil of oregano has significant antibacterial and antifungal abilities. However, just because these effects can be achieved in a laboratory does not mean that these effects translate to humans when ingested. With the recent anthrax scare, some marketers have suggested—even promoted—the antibacterial activity of oregano oil in anthrax. But there is no credible evidence to suggest that oregano oil could be directly useful for treatment of anthrax. The Federal Trade Commission has done consumers a service by warning such purveyors to cease such questionable, fraudulent claims.

The minute quantities of oregano and its essential oil used in flavoring food products are generally recognized as safe. But it can be moderately irritating to the skin and to the mucous membranes, and rare allergic reactions have been reported from contact with the pure essential oil. Therefore, oregano oil, like all essential oils, should be used with respect.