

Traditional Metis Medicines and Healing

Metis medicine is holistic medicine, it is concerned with the balance of:

- The Mental capacities
- The Emotional capacities
- The Physical capacities, and
- The Spiritual capacities
- There is an old Metis saying: “Let food be your medicine and let medicine be your food.”

Cautionary Note

- Do not try to self-medicate with the herbs, roots and other medicines that we talk about today. Many of these medicines contain small amounts of poisonous ingredients that can be harmful if used improperly. For example, Labrador tea leaves contain the poisonous compound andromedotoxin, which if consumed in large quantities, can cause headaches, vomiting and even death.

Traditional Metis Medicines and Healing

- Metis women performed important functions as healers and midwives. Most of the Elders' testimonies mention the "Indian Medicine" that was used in the old days, as opposed to the "White Medicine." Women usually learned the healing practices from their mothers, their grandmothers or a respected Elder in the community. They relied on the local ecosystem to find wild medicinal plants: they had painkillers, digestive aids and anti-inflammatory agents, which were part of a large pharmacopoeia that is still used today.

Medicines

- Traditionally, the Metis lived a lifestyle that was in harmony with nature. Healing salves, poultices, liniments, preparations and foodstuffs were a natural part of daily living. Metis women supplied most of their family's own medicines. These were gathered in season and stored within easy reach. Bundles of Seneca Root, Rat Root (wild ginger), Yarrow, Wild Mustard, and Red Willow hung from the walls or were stored in the kitchen cupboard.

Gathering Medicines

- The Metis women Elders teach that something must always be given back when harvesting medicines, usually tobacco. Some Metis put down pieces of the fungus from the diamond willow as an offering. One must only take as much as is needed and never harm the plants while harvesting. Everyone can barter for medicine. Knowledge of herbal mixtures and tinctures is entrusted, not given.

Sacred Herbs and Lead Medicines

- **Sweetgrass**
- **Cedar**
- **Sage**
- **Tobacco**

Sweetgrass

- Sweetgrass is extremely aromatic with a lingering odor. It helps one to focus if nervous energy is threatening one's functioning. The Sweetgrass ceremony itself is meant to be a sharing, inclusive ceremony of great significance. A Sweetgrass braid in the house means we are paying attention to goodwill. Sweetgrass braids can be boiled and the decoction given to a young girl in a difficult labour to facilitate childbirth.

Preparing Sweetgrass

- **Before braiding Sweetgrass it is placed in three piles. One stands for Strength, one stands for Honesty and one for Courage. When the three are braided together they stand for Kindness and Love. The braid also signifies the necessary unity between Body, Mind and Spirit.**

Cedar

- **Cedar is burned while praying. The prayers rise on the cedar smoke and are carried to the Creator. Cedar is also spread with Sage on the floor of the Sweatlodge among some groups. Cedar branches are brushed in the air to cleanse a home during the House Blessing Ceremony. Cedar is believed to drive out negative energy and bring in good influences.**

Cedar cont'd

- Cedar is also used over doors and windows to protect the inside of the house and its occupants from negative influences and spirits. It can also be placed in the four corners of a room for the same purpose.

Cedar cont'd

- **The crushed leaves of Cedar can be mixed with other herbs and boiled to make a decoction used as a wash and drink to treat a “twisted face” caused by a stroke. The powdered leaves are also mixed with other ground plants and water to form a paste used as a poultice to treat “twisted face” caused by “bad medicine.” This ailment differs from a stroke in that it does not involve paralysis of the tongue.**

Sage

- Sage is one of the four sacred medicines of Aboriginal people. It is used in purifying smudges, particularly women's smudges. Wild Sage is boiled as a tea and taken for colds, fevers, intestinal flu and pinworms. It also helps to eliminate spasms of the intestinal tract. Wild Sage was often called *l'herbe du saint* by the Metis. This was because the priests would bless this plant and give it to the people to give to their children, thus it was called "holy plant".

Sage cont'd

- **Powdered Sage leaves are also mixed with other ground plants and water to form a paste used as a poultice to treat “twisted face” caused by “bad medicine.” This paste is applied to the unaffected side of the face to draw the face back to normal. The poultice can also be used for pain.**

Sage cont'd

- The aromatic leaves can be rubbed on the skin as an insect repellent and were often used in trap lures. Sage can also be boiled in water and the water sprinkled on the ground around a campsite to ward off mosquitoes, lice and other insects. Sage leaves are often chewed to bring luck; thus, some call it the “bingo medicine.”

Tobacco

- **Tobacco is given to a healer or Elder when one asks for their assistance or advice.**

Treatments for Specific Illnesses

- **Arthritis**
- **Asthma**
- **Diabetes**
- **Tuberculosis**
- **Cancer**
- **Headaches**

Arthritis

- **Burdock root tea helps to reduce swelling and deposits in the joints associated with arthritis. Metis healers burn pieces of tinder fungus on the skin as a counterirritant to treat arthritis. Some say that placing muskrat fur over joints that are affected by arthritis works as a treatment.**

Arthritis cont'd

- The Water Lily is often used as a treatment. The rhizomes—the underground rootlike stems which bear both roots and shoots—of the yellow pond lily are chewed to treat arthritic pain.

Asthma

- Balsam Poplar bark and sap can be boiled together to make a tea given to children to treat asthma.
- Juniper berries can be smoked in a pipe to treat asthma.

Asthma cont'd

- Elmer Ghostkeeper gives a family recipe for the treatment of asthma and bronchitis: “A piece of the balsam bark the size of the patient’s hand, and four-inch long roots from a Saskatoon plant and a willow tree were boiled into a tea. The patient drank a cup of it every day until the disease was cured. The patient was also required to say a prayer asking Mother Earth and the plant’s spirits for their gifts of medicine and thanking them for restoring his or her health.”

Diabetes

- **The sap of the Balsam Poplar can be drunk to treat diabetes and high blood pressure. Two buds of the Balsam Poplar can be boiled for 30 minutes with Aspen branch bark for diabetes treatment. Tea made from an equal mixture of Blueberry and Yarrow leaves is also used. The leafy stem of the Black Currant is used in combination with other plants to form a boiled extract medicine as are Wild Mint leaves or the rhizome of the Sweet Flag.**

Tuberculosis

- Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by the bacillus *mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Europeans brought this disease to North America. During the late 1800s when the railway was being built through Saskatchewan, TB was killing 10 percent of the Aboriginal population of Saskatchewan each year.

Tuberculosis cont'd

- The Metis have a number of treatments for TB. The ripened fruit of the Red Willow is made into a decoction for the treatment of tuberculosis. Yarrow flowers, Balsam Fir bark, and Rat Root are boiled together, cooled and Blueberry leaves are then added to make the ingredients for a tea used as a treatment for tuberculosis.

TB cont'd

- Another treatment for TB is to boil twelve roots and stems of the Saskatoon, then drink the decoction. Similarly, preparations made from the leaves of the Rock Tripe Fern (*fougère tripe-de-roche*), or the stems and roots of the Mountain Ash were also used.

Cancer

- Aboriginal people have a number of preparations used to treat cancer, such as compounds made from a (Trembling Aspen) bark infusion, Wild Mint in combination with other herbs, or the root of the Cow Parsnip in a medicinal tea. Labrador tea is also used to reduce cancer symptoms. Others tell us that the ashes of poplar wood burnt in a wood stove can be mixed in a glass of water and taken to treat cancer.

Headaches

- To treat a headache, cut a potato into slices and fold them into a dishtowel. Tie this across the forehead to cure the headache. For migraine headaches, boil water with cider vinegar, place a towel over your head, lean over the boiling mixture and breath in the steam.

Medicinal Plants

- Yarrow
- Wild Mint
- White Poplar
- Rat Root
- Seneca Root
- Cod Liver Oil
- Gumweed
- Black Poplar
- Balsam Poplar
- Red Willow
- Purple Coneflower
- Bearberry
- Comfrey
- Cow Parsnip
- Cranberries
- Fireweed

Yarrow

- The Cree names for this plant translate as “head medicine” or “bone medicine.” The flowers and leaves of the Yarrow plant are burned and the smoke is inhaled to treat headaches. A tea made from the flowers is good for clearing mucous discharge from the bladder and will produce perspiration by opening the pores. Mixed with other plants it is rubbed on aching bones or swellings to relieve the pain.

Yarrow

- To treat headaches, the leaves and flowers can be dried and placed in the nostrils. Fresh flowers can be chewed and the paste applied to stings, cuts and sores. The flower decoction can be drunk to relieve menstrual cramps or heavy menstruation. Yarrow root, mixed with other plants was rubbed on aching bones or swellings to relieve the pain.

Wild Mint

- The leaves of the wild mint (*Mentha arvensis*) are used to make mint tea that can be drunk to treat a cough or cold. Wild mint is often called *li boum Ste. Anne* by the Metis. It is considered a woman's medicine because it is used to prevent excessive bleeding and miscarriages. It is also used as part of a compound of medicines used for treating cancer.

White Poplar, Trembling Aspen

- In the very early days, poplar wood ashes were used as a source of salt. The inner green bark can be used to dress a wound. The white “dust” on the bark can be scraped off and applied to deep cuts to coagulate the blood and stop bleeding. This dust was also used to treat venereal disease.

Sweet Flag, Weecase, Wikhas, Ratroot

- Muskrat root or Weecase, is the most widely known and used Aboriginal medicine. In the Michif and French languages the plant is called *Belle-Angélique*. The plant gets the name ratroot because muskrats like to chew on its white fleshy roots.

Wikhas

- Many people chew the rhizome and swallow the juice to treat colds and coughs, including whooping cough. It was also used to treat toothache, teething pain, headache, rheumatism, muscle pain and intestinal worms. The sap from the inside of the stems is used to treat venereal disease. A very strong tea made by boiling rat root and Seneca root has also been used to treat cancer. Weecase was also grated, mixed with bear grease and applied to the chest to bring cold relief

Seneca

- Aboriginal people have known of the healing properties of Seneca root for centuries. The root can be chewed and the juice swallowed to treat a sore throat or sore mouth. The crushed root can be packed in a tooth cavity to treat toothache. The crushed roots used with other herbs can be made into a poultice and applied to cuts to relieve pain and prevent infection. The root can also be used for heart medicine and as a blood medicine.

Cod Liver Oil

- The Burbot (*Lota lota*), usually called a Mariah in Manitoba, is considered to be a delicacy by many Metis and most Metis mothers would use the oil from its liver as a preventive medicine as one would use store-bought cod liver oil. It was customary to give Metis children a big feed of Mariah before the onset of winter. The Maria is part of the cod family – a freshwater cod.

Gumweed or *Kahpashaquake*

- This is a plant with small yellow flower heads, which have very gummy and sticky green bracts underneath. The plant is brewed in a tea to extract the gummy resin. The resin contains oils which have anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial and antifungal activities. It is used to treat kidney ailments, canker sores, venereal disease, asthma and bronchitis.

Balm of Gilead -Black Poplar Buds

- Balm of Gilead is a salve made with black poplar buds fried in fat and strained. This is then applied to heal rashes caused by poison ivy, poison oak, or used to heal burns.

Balsam Poplar

- The sap is drunk to treat diabetes and high blood pressure. The bark and sap together are boiled to make a tea given to children to treat asthma. The spring leaf buds are placed in hot bathwater and steeped until an extract forms on the surface. Bathing in this water treats skin diseases such as eczema or psoriasis. Poplar sap is also mixed with spruce needles and heated. The mixture is used as a poultice to draw poison from open wounds.

Balsam Poplar

- The buds can also relieve the teething pain of babies by being rubbed directly on the gums, or cooled water infused with the extract can be used to rinse the baby's mouth. Sap from the poplar tree was also mixed with spruce needles and heated. The mixture was used as a poultice to draw poison from open wounds. In between treatments, the wound is washed with hot salt water, then a new poultice of sap is applied.

Red Willow

- The Metis would simmer the bark of the red willow to make a tea which was then cooled to lukewarm and drunk as a healer for general ailments. The fruit stem or pith can be made into a wash for the treatment of snow blindness. The ripened fruit is made into a decoction for the treatment of tuberculosis.

Red Willow

- In the spring, a sugary substance seeps through the bark of the red willow. When hardened, it forms crystals on the bark. These crystals are scraped off, and then made into a powder, which is used to sooth a baby's teething pains. It is also used for adult tooth and gum infections.

Purple Coneflower, Echinacea or Snakeroot

- The Plains Indians used this plant to treat poisonous insect and snakebites, thus it was called snakeroot. The plant has immune-stimulating components that increase natural killer cell activity. It improves the migration of white blood cells to attack foreign microorganisms. Echinacea is an effective anti-biotic and activates the immune system to fight off disease, thus it is used to ward off the common cold and to relieve the symptoms of hay fever.

Bearberry

- The Bearberry or Northern Comandre (*sas jíé* in Dene) has an edible fruit that is not good tasting. This berry was used in medicines for chest troubles, probably tuberculosis. The roots, due to their peculiar odor, are believed to be of medicinal value.

Comfrey

- The European ancestors of the Metis brought comfrey to North America. This herb has been cultivated since 400 BC as a treatment for bronchial problems and to heal wounds and broken bones. The allantoin content of the plant's root appears to increase the white blood cells and increases the rate of cell multiplication. Allantoin is also found in the milk of nursing mothers. Comfrey roots together with dandelion roots are used to make coffee, which tastes practically the same as ordinary coffee.

Cow Parsnip, *Berce*

- The Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) is sometimes called “wild rhubarb.” The grated root can be mixed with warm water and used as a poultice for ulcers or swollen legs. The root is part of a medicinal mixture used to treat cancer. Dried root is placed in the mouth to cure toothaches.

Cranberries

- The cranberry has one of the highest Vitamin C contents of any fruit and is useful as a kidney and urinary infection treatment. Mixed with springwater, the juice of the swamp cranberry can clear a sore throat within two hours.

High Bush Cranberries

- **High Bush Cranberries, (*lee pa binaw*):**
The bark of the cranberry is still harvested to manufacture a variety of medicines and drugs. The bark of the cranberry bush is also used as a component of Labrador tea. This bark in tea was used to prevent and heal infections of the bladder.

Fireweed (willow-herb or bouquets rouge)

- This tall perennial has lance shaped leaves and pink flowers with four petals and long seedpods. The stems are sometimes used as a substitute for smoking tobacco. A tea made by boiling the entire plant is used to treat intestinal worms. The root can be peeled and chewed into a paste to draw infection out of abscesses and boils. It also prevents infections in wounds.

More Medicinal Plants

- Broad-Leaved Plantain
- Juniper
- Pink Wintergreen
- Labrador Tea
- Puffball fungus
- Rosehips
- Spruce Gum
- Tamarack
- Blueberry
- Wild Buckwheat
- Willow
- Mooseberry

Broad-Leaved Plantain

Frog Leaves

- These leaves are excellent for healing cuts, sores and boils. Applied directly to the wound, they will draw the infection out.

Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)

- Juniper berries, when still green, can be boiled to make a remedy for kidney ailments. The mature berries or cones must not be eaten. The berries can also be smoked in a pipe to treat asthma.

Beaver Ears (Pink Wintergreen)

- The leaves of this plant are used for urinary blockage. The leaves can be mashed with lard and put on a cut to stop bleeding and promote healing. Chewing the leaves relieves a toothache.

Labrador Tea, Muskeg Tea or Swamp Tea

- This shrub is also called “Medicine Tea” by the Metis. The aromatic shrub has alternating evergreen leaves with edges rolled under and rusty hair underneath. The white flowers have five separate petals. Labrador tea is common in muskeg, bogs and wet coniferous forests. The tea is commonly used to treat stomach flu, pneumonia and urination difficulties.

Labrador Tea cont'd

- A powder from the leaves is mixed with lard to treat burns, scalds or eczema. To staunch blood flow from deep cuts the leaves are chewed to form a paste that is applied to the wound. Labrador tea is often splashed on the rocks during sweat lodge ceremonies to produce an aromatic smell and for its healing properties when the vapors are inhaled.

Puffball Fungus, “the ones that smoke,” *vesse-de-loup*

- The puffball fungus has a small round body that when mature, releases spores through a small hole in the top of the fungus when crushed. When observed on the ground, they appear to be a cluster of small white eggs. The cottony mass in the centre of the ball can be used on a wound to stop bleeding. One can also squirt the spores up a nostril, to stop a nosebleed. The spores are also used as a baby powder to prevent chafing.

Rosehips

- Rosehips are used by the Metis as a source of vitamin C, and as well for infections, colds, sore throat, and generally, cleansing toxins from the body. The roots of the wild rose are used in a decoction for colds and fevers.

Spruce Gum

- Spruce gum can be chewed or put into heated water and inhaled to relieve a cold. It is also a good healer for cuts, and sores, and was used on bullet wounds in the old days. It was chewed, then directly applied to the wound. Spruce gum is made into an ointment to treat impetigo. This gum is still used by Metis fiddlers to rosin their bows.

Tamarack Bark

- The inner bark of the Tamarack is grated and used for itching, skin problems or open sores. This inside reddish bark is boiled and is used to draw the pus from boils. Usually it only takes one day to dry up the boil.

Blueberry, *Vaccinium myrtilloides*

- Eating blueberries is a good cure for acne. The stems were boiled to make a drink taken to prevent pregnancy. Blueberry soup (made with cornstarch and sugar) is given as the last course at traditional feasts. This is believed to help digestion.

Wild Buckwheat, Western Dock and Willow Dock

- The milk taken from the stem was used as a treatment for warts. One would break the stem in half and apply the sticky milk to the wart three times a day. The root was chewed and applied to serious wounds to stop bleeding and promote healing. The plant contains emodin and chrysophanic acid, the derivatives of which have long been used as topical applications to treat fungal infections such as ringworm, psoriasis and other skin disorders.

Willow

- The bark of the Willow tree contains salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin. Willow bark is less effective in treating headache than ASA pills, but more effective where long-term therapy is required as it is less likely to cause stomach upset.

Mooseberry (Moosomina), the Low Bush Cranberry

- These berries (*Viburnum edule*) can be eaten fresh, but are usually used for jam because they are very sour. The twig tips are often chewed to relieve a sore throat and the open buds can be rubbed on lip sores to dry and heal them. The ripe fruits are boiled to make a cough medicine.

Healing Practices

- Purification
- Rattles
- Fans and Feathers
- Sacred Objects
- Bad Medicine

Purification

- Purification occurs through rituals of healing. Central to this for many Aboriginal groups is the Sweatlodge. Healing ceremonies like this were carried out among warriors who had killed a man during battle. It is believed that this action released toxic levels of hormones and other substances that could adversely affect a person if he was not treated (known today as the phenomena of “battle fatigue” and “post-traumatic stress syndrome”).

Purification

- It is traditional for the Metis to feast on muskrat every spring as a way of cleansing the body. Some people eat up to three meals a day of muskrat. The muskrat is considered to be the cleanest of all animals since it lives in water and eats the roots of plants, which grow in water. Most of the plants eaten by the muskrat are also commonly used Metis medicines such as Rat Root.

Rattles

- Rattles are shaken to call up the spirit of life when someone is sick. They are also used to summon the spirits governing the four directions to assist those who are seeking spiritual and physical cleansing (in a sweat lodge for example).

Fans and Feathers

- The feathers and fans of eagles and hawks are sacred objects which serve to take our prayers to the Creator. For example it is a common practice to hang an eagle feather above one's head in the sweat lodge. As a purification ritual people use a feather or fan to smudge themselves

Sacred Objects

- Sacred objects are collected on one's life journey. They may be objects from nature such as a feather, a stone (Grandfather) or a special herb. For others it may be a special photograph or book. For the holder, these symbolize aspects of their spiritual journey. Contact with these objects has a powerful effect in raising awareness of the spiritual significance of ordinary objects.

Bad Medicine

- In many Aboriginal groups, anger is conceptualized as a form of psychic energy, which is “thrown” at another person. They are said to have “thrown bad medicine.” This emotion of anger is then believed to “stick” to the spirit body of the recipient or target person. Envy, jealousy, greed and hate also fall into this category.

Bad Medicine cont'd

- This type of spiritual pollution will eventually drain the radiance and health of the spirit until eventually the person becomes ill. Thus many Aboriginal purification ceremonies deal with ritual cleansing of the spirit body that is believed to extend approximately one and one-half inches beyond the physical body.

Healing Practices

Conclusion

To achieve balance in life and good health
Metis Elders teach the importance of:

- A balanced diet of natural foods.
- Meditation and introspection.
- Physical activity.
- Spiritual practices and rituals.
- Giving of yourself to others: “caring and sharing.”