

Love the SKIN you're IN

Use the power of herbs to help cure common problems and build more beautiful skin from the inside out.

BY DIANA KELLY



After applying moisturizer, spend a minute or two massaging it into your skin with clean fingers.

We've all had skin issues at one time or another—acne, rashes, eczema.

They're some of the top reasons people go to see a doctor. Today, there's more demand than ever for dermatology services; unfortunately, the U.S. currently has a shortage of these specialists. In some parts of the country, you might have to wait several months for an appointment. All the more reason to explore safe herbal DIY remedies for common, benign skin problems.

"I'm all for at-home treatments," says New York City-based dermatologist Doris Day, MD, author of *Beyond Beautiful: Using the Power of Your Mind and Aesthetic Breakthroughs to Look Naturally Young and Radiant* (Center Street). "People can start there even if they have access to dermatologists. But I always recommend seeing a board-certified dermatologist when possible to get a complete skin check and to determine the best ways to take care of your skin, even with at-home or over-the-counter ingredients and products. While getting professional skin-care help can be expensive, it's less expensive than the cost of a delayed diagnosis of a skin issue or even skin cancer," she states. That being said, Day acknowledges that not everyone has access to

dermatologists through insurance or due to geographic location.

"Although I used to work in a research lab with skin-care products, I like to take a holistic approach," Day continues. Keep in mind that the term *natural* doesn't always mean something is safer. (As with food products, the FDA doesn't have a regulatory definition of *natural* for beauty products, so if you're not creating a treatment yourself, remain skeptical until you find out exactly what's in it.)

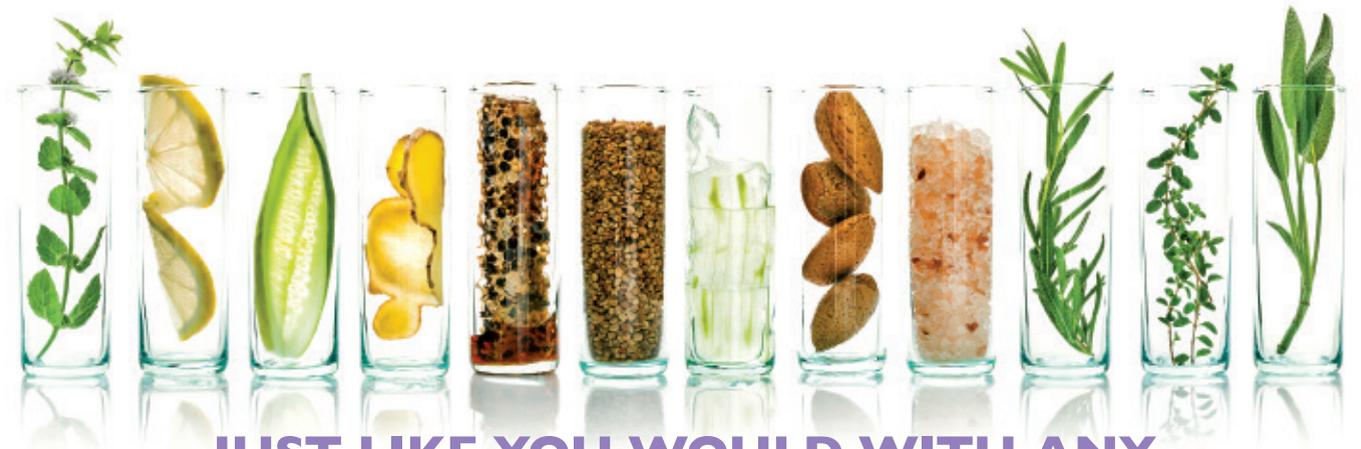
Just like you would with any skin-care product, try herbal remedies sparingly at first to see how your skin reacts. Working with an herbalist who has experience with skin problems and treatments will help you decide which products might best serve your particular issues.

Although they come from nature, herbs are still powerful and may affect more than your skin, says Day. A controversial 2007 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that topical use of products containing lavender oil and/or tea tree oil may cause enlarged breast tissue (aka gynecomastia) in boys prior to puberty. (More research indicating the potential estrogenic properties of these and dozens of other plant-derived oils was presented at a recent Endocrine Society conference, although other studies

have shown no estrogenic effects.)

"In general, plants are very biocompatible with the skin," says Stephanie Tourles, a licensed aesthetician/herbalist and certified aromatherapist in Orland, Maine. "They're nontoxic, safe, gentle and don't disrupt the microbiome, your skin's protective bacteria that enhance its immunity. Your skin recognizes vital chemicals, vitamins and minerals in plants and drinks them up." She recommends that people try something simple and inexpensive before visiting the dermatologist for skin conditions such as dryness, acne, sunburn or redness.

"Back in the '90s, most people thought I was so weird using herbal remedies," says cosmetic chemist and aesthetician Elina Fedotova, who created her own line of holistic skin-care products, Elina Organics. Thankfully, science and society eventually caught up. In 2007, she founded the Association of Holistic Skin Care Practitioners (AHSCP), an education-focused and community-oriented group for herbalists, aestheticians, dermatologists and naturopaths—anyone who works with the skin—who are interested in integrative treatments. "Now we have science and a lot of doctors of functional medicine using a holistic approach," says Fedotova, who's based in Kalamazoo, Michigan.



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PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Tackle Your Skin Complaints Naturally

If you're curious about trying herbal remedies for clearer, brighter, healthier skin, start small with a treatment or two and see how you like the results. You could save money and get gorgeous, glowing skin—all without having gone to a dermatologist's office.

SUNBURN

No surprise here: When your skin is red and inflamed from too much sun exposure, apply aloe (*Aloe barbadensis*) to help ease the pain and redness. "It's anti-inflammatory and anesthetic," says Day. Of course, get in the habit of wearing sunscreen daily.

BROWN SPOTS

Often called age spots or liver spots, brown spots are really just cases of hyperpigmentation, a usually harmless condition that occurs when excess melanin, the brown pigment responsible for skin color, accumulates. Spots tend to show up on areas that receive a lot of sun exposure, including the face, backs of the hands, arms, chest, shoulders and legs.

If you have just a few age spots on your face, Tourles recommends applying a dab of plain yogurt to each spot twice daily for 10 minutes, then rinsing it off. Try it for four weeks and you should see clearer, brighter skin.

"Putting yogurt on these spots may help them fade over time," says Tourles. The lactic acid in the yogurt speeds exfoliation of the outer layer of dead skin cells while also acting as a natural bleaching agent.

You can also apply papaya (*Carica papaya*) pulp as an exfoliator. It has natural acids and enzymes that help keep skin clear, says Tourles. Take a slice of fresh papaya and mash it up until it's like a slurry (you want about one tablespoon). Apply to your face and neck and leave it on for 20 to 30 minutes. If it starts burning, rinse it off. But if it's tingling, it's doing its job. Do this once or twice a week for a smooth complexion.

"It's vital that you wear a natural sunscreen over the affected area daily, as further exposure to the sun will darken spots," Tourles cautions.

(Natural—aka "physical"—sun-screens sit on the skin and create a barrier to rays.) Also, note that dark, deep age spots may be resistant to natural treatments.

FUNGUS

Ringworm—aka tinea or dermatophytosis—is one of the most common fungal skin infections. It typically occurs on the toenails, the feet (aka athlete's foot) or the groin (aka jock itch).

"I recommend my clients try usnea (*Usnea barbata*, which is a lichen) or black walnut hull (*Juglans nigra*) tincture," says Tourles. Dilute the tincture 50 percent with water and store in a dropper-top glass bottle. Label and date it. Apply a few drops to all of your nails—even the ones that aren't affected, since fungus can spread. For athlete's foot, apply a dropper of your diluted tincture to each foot and rub in between the toes. "Do these treatments twice daily for several months until the fungus abates; consistency is key," says Tourles. Wear clean, dry socks or go barefoot so feet can breathe, she advises. Remember to wear shower shoes in public locker rooms and around pools, since fungi can be lurking on the floor.

REDNESS AND ROSACEA

Rosacea is an inflammatory skin disease that involves redness around the cheeks and nose. It might look like you're blushing or have a flushed nose

or cheeks. While rosacea can't be cured, it can be treated. "It's very environmental and lifestyle driven," says Day. "Triggers that cause flare-ups include stress, extremes in temperature, alcohol and some spices. I instruct patients to avoid their triggers once they know what they are and to control the condition by seeing their dermatologist," she says. When it does flare, the best ways to treat rosacea are: avoiding the sun; washing with a gentle cleanser, using only your fingertips; and avoiding using washcloths, toners, astringents and deodorant soaps on the area.

One herb that can offer immediate relief from the redness of rosacea is calendula (*Calendula officinalis*), says Tourles. "Use a gentle, natural, nondrying facial cleanser, followed by a calendula hydrosol [essentially a "flower water" that's produced by distilling fresh plants] and calendula facial cream to soothe and minimize irritation and inflammation," she suggests. A plain yogurt face mask can help minimize a rosacea flare-up as well.

ACNE

Breakouts occur when pores get clogged, usually with dead skin cells. When your body starts to produce sebum—oil that prevents skin from drying out—the dead skin cells get stuck in the pore, along with dirt and bacteria that live on the skin, resulting in a red, swollen, angry pimple. Using



CALENDULA



GOAT MILK SOAP

The milk proteins in this type of soap have antimicrobial properties that can ease acne. Highly moisturizing, it also contains antioxidants and plenty of skin-loving vitamins and minerals.

LAVENDER FLOWERS

Skin-soothing lavender buds are often used in detoxing scrubs due to the powerful antioxidants they contain.

COMFREY

This healing herb helps regenerate skin, thanks to allantoin, rosmarinic acid and tannins. Use it externally only—not on open wounds.

DRIED LAVENDER

Multitasking lavender has skin-healing and antibacterial properties. Mix the dried buds with Epsom salts for a soothing bath ritual.

ESSENTIAL OILS

Always dilute these with some sort of carrier oil (almond, jojoba, olive) before applying them to your skin or adding to bathwater.

BATH SALTS

When buying these bath enhancers, look for those made with real sea salt, herbs and essential oils (if you want a scented bath). Avoid chemical or synthetic ingredients.

FRESH ALOE VERA

Skin-calming aloe vera gel (the clear, gooey part at the center of the leaf) is good for more than just sunburns. Use it on breakouts as well as dry skin.

ORGANIC SOAP

Opting for organic will help you avoid potentially harmful parabens, sulfates and other harsh chemicals that can aggravate skin problems.

beauty products with occlusive agents that hold in moisture and protect the skin can also lead to clogged pores and make you prone to breakouts, Day says. Avoid ingredients such as petrolatum, lanolin, zinc oxide, silicones and possibly some oils, which are occlusive.

When you're suffering from acne or oily skin, apply witch hazel (*Hamelis virginiana*), a natural astringent, with a cotton ball after you're done cleansing your face, suggests Day. It will help remove oils from your skin without drying it out. "A strained solution of water with any type of essential oil, like lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), will help combat pathogens on the skin and is beneficial for managing acne, which can be caused by bacteria," says Fedotova. (For a make-at-home facial mask designed for acne-prone skin, see "DIY Beauty Treatments," page 96.)

ECZEMA

Characterized by patches of very itchy, dry skin that are often red and may have small, raised bumps or even ooze or bleed, eczema is a common inflammatory autoimmune condition that can be triggered by any number of irritants, including allergens, the environment, stress, a cold or exercise, but there's also a genetic component.

"We can't cure eczema, but we can control it," says Day. "It's not naturally progressive. Taking good care of your skin and managing your stress can have a big impact on eczema flare-ups." For many people, dietary changes (cutting out common food triggers, such as gluten, dairy, eggs, soy, sugar or corn) can make a difference in their skin. Integrative health practitioners will often work to get to the root of the problem and utilize lifestyle changes to minimize flares.

Topical dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) or burdock root (*Arctium lappa*) can calm inflammation, suggests Fedotova. You could also use calendula or chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*).

DRY SKIN

Many factors, including genetics, the products you're using and the climate (indoors and out), can contribute to dryness. Internal hydration, though? That's not generally a factor, says Day.



ROSEMARY TEA

You need to hydrate your skin separately, even if you're drinking plenty of water all day.

Tourles agrees: "When the skin is hydrated, oiled and kept elastic, then it usually won't have an inflammatory, itchy response." She uses a calendula-infused hydrosol and oil on clients with dry skin. "Calendula in general is anti-inflammatory, soothes irritation and is extremely gentle. The hydrosol hydrates and the oil seals in hydration." Tourles also uses soothing comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*) in the form of a salve on clients' feet, hands and back.

BLACKHEADS AND ENLARGED PORES

Blackheads are small, dark, pinpoint bumps that are caused by clogged hair follicles. Fedotova suggests exfoliating with a mixture of buttermilk, which has lactic acid and will brighten the skin, and baking soda. To reduce the acidity of your skin and help clean pores, combine a tablespoon of buttermilk with a teaspoon of baking soda. Dab it on with your fingertips, leave on for one minute, then rinse.

OILY SKIN

To counteract oily skin, use a white clay mask two or three times a week, says Tourles. Combine a tablespoon of kaolin clay and a tablespoon of water, peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) tea or rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) tea. Make a paste and apply it over oily areas, such as your face, neck and back. It works on acne-prone skin too. "This mask absorbs oil, stimulates circulation and helps detoxify those clogged sebaceous glands and remove blackheads and whiteheads," says Tourles.

Fedotova recommends rose or lavender water as astringents to help bring the pH level of the skin down. Some people like witch hazel as a natural astringent as well.

COMBINATION SKIN

"If you have dry patches on your cheeks and an oily T-zone [forehead, nose and chin], I highly recommend using jojoba (*Simmondsia chinensis*) oil on the dry areas," says Tourles. "It tends to be nonreactive for most people, even those with sensitive skin." She suggests using a white clay mask (see "Oily Skin" section) on your T-zone.

Lifestyle Factors That Impact Your Skin

You've probably noticed that when you eat certain foods, are under a ton of stress or aren't sleeping well, your skin doesn't look its best. That's because your largest organ is a reflection of what's going on inside your body. In fact, the epidermis (top layer of skin) has special cells that are part of your immune system. An unusual rash could signal an infection in your body; a new growth could be a forewarning of skin cancer or an internal cancer; discoloration may be a symptom of an adrenal disease; waxy-looking bumps on the arms, legs or trunk can indicate uncontrolled diabetes. If your skin problems—particularly rashes—don't resolve with the previously described herbal remedies and are accompanied by aches, fever or some other unusual symptom, schedule a visit with your doctor. In the meantime, make sure you have the following under control:

STRESS

When you're stressed, your body increases production of the hormone cortisol. Too much cortisol can spur your immune system to turn up inflammation in your body, which can aggravate skin conditions, such as

psoriasis, atopic dermatitis (the most common type of eczema), acne and even wound healing.

Stress will exacerbate anything you're prone to, says Day. "It may be rosacea, hair loss, eczema, acne, an ulcer—that's what your stress will trigger for you," she says. Some people internalize their stress, and that can impact how the physical body responds.

Proven ways to alleviate stress include meditation, exercise, playing with a pet, listening to music, taking a bath, talking with a friend and writing down your thoughts and concerns in a journal.

EXERCISE

Working out is good for the health of your skin and it may help you look younger—one study found that regular exercisers have skin that was closer in composition to that of someone 10 to 20 years younger. Still, to avoid breakouts, you need to practice good skin-care habits before and after exercise, says Day. Wash makeup off before working out and cleanse afterward to eliminate sweat. Removing soaked clothes and taking a shower after your run, tennis match or spin class is the best move to reduce your chances of "bacne" and breakouts on other parts of your body, but at the

very least, change and wipe sweat off to minimize the dirt and perspiration that can clog pores.

SLEEP

"There's no replacement for sleep," says Day. "For all that we can do for our skin, there's no cream or tonic that's going to replace it. Lack of sleep increases your risk of infection and makes your skin look more sallow and older." Aim for seven to eight hours of shut-eye nightly.

DIET

Dermatologists, aestheticians and herbal skin-care experts seem to agree that added sugar should be avoided when it comes to building healthy skin from the inside out. If you suffer from fungal problems, eliminate sugar from your diet and reduce simple carbohydrates. "Fungi feed on high-glycemic carbohydrates," says Tourles.

Certain foods, including dairy, gluten, peanuts, corn, eggs, soy, chocolate and sugar, may also cause an inflammatory response in people who are sensitive to them. Tourles recommends clients—particularly those who suffer from acne—cut dairy out of their diet to see if that helps. "Sometimes when you eat better, your skin will clear up. When I have an acne-prone client, I suggest a clean, low-inflammatory diet," she says.



PHOTOS: ISTOCK

Diana Kelly is a NYC-based writer, editor, digital content strategist and freelance writing coach who specializes in health and lifestyle topics. When she's not writing, Diana likes trying new dance workout classes, running, reading and playing with her adopted puppy, Jackson.