



Winter is Long: Bring The Buzz Back & Energize With Local Bee Products

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Bee keeping is a tradition that dates as far back as the 15th century in many parts of Europe, and has more recently taken hold here in Canada (1). Honey lovers are happy about this, while others express concern about non-native bees squeezing out the less prolific honey producing native bees. With the evolution of bee keeping in North America, Canadian apiaries now produce quality bee products such as honey, pollen and propolis that rival European production. Although all three of these products are wonders in themselves, the focus here is on the medicinal potential of propolis, and, to some extent, bee-pollen.

Back when sugar was a rare commodity (and not the health plague that it is today), people relied on bee keeping and honey as a means of maintaining some sweetness in their lives. The beauty of the bee, however, is that it has much more to offer in the realm of super-foods than simply honey.

Propolis is a natural resin, created by bees in the construction of their hives. It is produced from the resinous buds of conifer and poplar trees and is used as an antibiotic “mortar” to seal and protect the hive from external pathogens and bugs. Although there has been resurgence in the propolis market since the 1980’s, this super-resin has been in use since ancient times. The Greeks used it to treat abscesses, the Assyrians to heal wounds and tumours and the Egyptians used it for mummification (3). In modern times it shows promise in natural dentistry and as a powerful antimicrobial.

In 1988, a study out of Cuba showed comparable results between propolis and the drug tinidazole, in the treatment of giardia (a parasitic infection responsible for “beaver fever”)(4). Propolis also shows great potential as an antiviral medicine. One study examined its effect in the treatment of herpes simplex virus, of the female genitalia. After 10 days of treatment 24/30 women treated with propolis had

healed, whereas 14/30 women treated with acyclovir (antiviral drug) had healed, and 12/30 women in the placebo group (no active treatment) had healed (6). The group of women who were classified as having a “super-infection” best highlighted the potency of propolis. Propolis showed 55% improvement in this group, whereas acyclovir and placebo showed no improvement. Given this effect on herpes simplex virus, propolis may be a good topical treatment for oral cold sores too.

There are also various studies that point to the use of propolis as a mouth rinse with effect against plaque build up and streptococcus bacteria. In general, there seems to be some moderate antibacterial action from propolis but the evidence is quite weak. Regardless, propolis shows anti-parasitic, anti-viral and some anti-bacterial action, making it a wonderfully broad-spectrum medicine. As drug resistant “super-bugs” continue to evolve, it is important to realize that research continues to illuminate the efficacy and potency of natural, plant based medicines in the treatment of acute infections.

Apart from the antimicrobial action of propolis there are several preliminary studies that suggest propolis is anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant, causes cancer cell death in a variety of cancer types, is radio-protective (protects against radiation therapy side effects), and may be a potent blood thinner. It has also been shown to be a good immune boosting medicine, which may be why it has such a broad effect against viruses, parasites and bacteria.

Propolis is not the only bee product showing promise in the scientific literature. Bee pollen has shown some good effect in the treatment of prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate gland). It was also studied in conjunction with the use of bee venom in the treatment of symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis. Here, the findings were mixed, with one study showing marked improvement, and another showing little to no improvement in symptom scores for Multiple Sclerosis.

Given a lack of solid research to date, it seems that bee pollen is still applied more as a folk medicine, and is not often prescribed clinically. However, many view bee pollen as nature’s ultimate super food. It is said to contain a balance of vitamins, minerals and amino acids, depending on the plant source of the pollen, which include buckwheat, maize, pine and rapeseed. There are some claims that bee

pollen contains the full range of free amino acids, and that it is a much more protein dense food than even meat or dairy products (11).

Bee pollen is also thought to contain wonderful levels of antioxidants, namely carotenoids . In a lovely play on words, bee pollen is also full of B-vitamins, which are necessary for maintaining healthy liver function and keeping a balanced stress response in the body. Perhaps it is this B-vitamin content that make it a good “blood-builder,” tonic, and effective way to reduce cravings for sweets and alcohol, in the ways that traditional Chinese medicine has used pollen for centuries. More recently, we are seeing an increase in anecdotal evidence pointing to the use of local bee pollens in the treatment of seasonal allergies.

The efficiency of the bee is reflected in the variety of by-products that they produce. The bee offers a sweet treat, it supports the immune system, provides an antimicrobial medicine and a natural, full spectrum dietary supplement. Although there is currently more anecdote than science behind the medicinal uses of bee products, it is only a matter of time before the science catches up with the tradition. Until then, bee happy and bee healthy, enjoy your local propolis and pollen! Here are some places around London where you can explore the benefits of bee products, and help support a healthy, local industry.

www.davesapiaries.com

www.clovermead.com

www.windermeremanor.com/bees.htm

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