

Food for thought – garlic through the ages



Garlic has been employed in the prevention and treatment of disease since ancient times. It has been found in excavated Egyptian pyramids and Greek temples. There are Biblical references to garlic and ancient medical texts from Egypt, Greece, Rome, China and India each prescribed medical applications for garlic. In many cultures, garlic was administered to provide strength and increase work capacity for labourers.

Garlic was given to the original Olympic athletes in Greece, as perhaps one of the earliest performance enhancing agents.

Cloves of garlic were found in King Tutankhamen's tomb, which dates from ~1500 BC. Their purpose is not known – possibly they had religious significance or simply something left behind from the lunch of a careless workman! Several of the treatments described within the most authoritative medical text of the era prescribed garlic for abnormal growths (probably malignancies and abscesses), as well as circulatory problems and infestations with insects and parasites.

According to the Bible, the Jewish slaves in Egypt were fed garlic and other allium vegetables, apparently to give them strength and increase their productivity. The Talmud, a Jewish religious text dating from the 2nd century AD, recommends garlic to promote relations among married couples and there are several later references to its aphrodisiac properties through history!

The Romans perceived garlic as an aid to strength and endurance; it was part of a ship's manifest when it set out to sea and was fed to soldiers and sailors. Medicine in Rome was greatly influenced by the writings of Pliny the Elder, a Greek physician who listed 23 uses for garlic. Garlic was believed to confer significant protection against toxins and infections, a finding corroborated in the 20th Century by investigations of the effects of garlic upon certain liver diseases.

In ancient Chinese medicine, garlic was prescribed to aid respiration and digestion, particularly to treat diarrhoea and worm infestation. It appears that garlic was also used to treat sadness or depression.

Garlic has long been associated with the healing process in India. It was also observed to have a diuretic effect and it is now well recognized that garlic, appropriately used, will reduce blood pressure and improve high cholesterol levels.

Garlic became available in Europe after the Roman legions moved north and in the Middle Ages it was grown in the monasteries as a medicinal plant. Later, garlic featured in the University 'physic' gardens of the 16th and 17th centuries.

At some time, along the way, garlic was proposed to protect warm blooded creatures, such as ourselves, against vampires. This belief has been widely held and, not missing an opportunity, in the 1990's a group of Norwegian scientists decided to test the hypothesis that garlic discourages the activities of vampires.

Vampires are feared everywhere, but the Balkan region has been especially haunted. The scientists wanted to explore the alleged protective effect of garlic against vampires experimentally. Owing to the lack of available vampires, they used leeches instead.

In strictly standardized research surroundings, the leeches were to attach themselves to either a hand smeared with garlic or to a clean hand. The garlic-smeared hand was preferred in two out of three cases. When they preferred the garlic the leeches took only 14.9 seconds to attach themselves, compared with 44.9 seconds when going to the non-garlic hand. *Ughh!*

This study challenges the traditional belief that garlic has prophylactic properties. It suggests that the reverse may in fact be true. The results indicate that garlic might possibly attract vampires. The researchers concluded that to avoid a Balkan-like development in Norway, restrictions on the use of garlic should be considered....

Yes, the study was conducted with scientific method and the results were statistically significant and hence they were published in a Norwegian scientific journal. But, on balance, one has to say that the likely benefits of garlic must certainly outweigh the potential attraction of vampires to the essence of garlic exuded from one's pores!

Notwithstanding the Norwegian view, it is notable that ancient cultures developing in isolation from one another came to many of the same conclusions about garlic's action and efficacy. Modern science is tending to confirm many of the beliefs of ancient cultures regarding garlic, defining mechanisms of action and exploring garlic's potential for disease prevention and treatment.

References: Historical Perspective on the Use of Garlic. Richard S Rivlin. *J. Nutr. March 1, 2001 vol. 131 no. 3 951S-954S*

Does garlic protect against vampires? An experimental study. Sandvik H, et al. *Tidsskr Nor Laegeforen. 1994 Dec 10;114(30):3583-6*

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