

I have a cold and cough. It has been at least a year since I have had a virus like this, and it has turned my thoughts to old home remedies for the common ailments that afflict most of us from time to time. The only one that I have taken this time is good old Vicks Vapo-Rub. Even the smell of Vicks brings back memories of my mother rubbing it on my chest to fight a cough. Our doctor-neighbor—a physician who was usually in favor of the less invasive medical treatments—felt that Vicks was totally useless, but I cannot agree. Perhaps, it was the comforting, familiar odor of the salve that helped relieve our symptoms. I just know that I still like Vicks, and I find that a dab in each nostril also seems to alleviate a sinus headache.

There was another chest rub that seemed a bit more harsh. Musterole—though I am not sure about the spelling—came in a little white ceramic container, and it was “hotter” than Vicks. I guess it reminds me a little of the very spicy mustard we get at a Chinese restaurant. That opens the passages, for sure!

I remember my father talking about the cough syrup his mother made. She slowly cooked chopped onions in a frying pan that she placed on the cookstove—not on the hottest part, but toward the water reservoir, and the onions stewed slowly, releasing their juices until a syrupy liquid formed. This, Dad said, would relieve a cough. I think they also used onions as a poultice for a chest cold.

Chicken soup was, and is still, also a “go-to” treatment for a cold. I have read that this remedy is actually validated by scientific studies.

For an upset stomach, Vernor’s ginger ale was the only treatment I can remember. We didn’t have soda pop at home very often, but it was the only thing that soothed us after vomiting. I don’t know what people sip where Vernor’s is not available. Other ginger ales just don’t do the job.

In Sweden, blueberry soup was the treatment for an upset stomach, and it is very effective, especially if the malady involved the lower part of the digestive system. And, even if one is perfectly healthy, blueberry soup is a treat. And, it is easy to make: I just cook some frozen or fresh berries with a little sugar and water, thicken the juice with potato starch, and let it cool. It is tasty served warm or cold, and a dollop of yogurt makes it even better.

A sore throat called for a gargle of warm salt water. This worked well, and we still use this method of relieving a very painful throat. Some people gargle with mouthwash, but that is not as soothing as salt water.

When we were children, our most common complaint was really just a side effect of our lifestyle. We never wore shoes during the summer, and stubbed toes pained us all too often. Sometimes, if a nail were injured or the toe bled, our mother would wrap a strip of muslin around it as a bandage, but the usual remedy was to hop around on one foot and moan. That was very effective.

The remarkable thing is that we really didn't need home remedies very often. A combination of a healthy outdoor life, good homegrown food, and parental attitudes that tended toward—"Go and play, it will feel better"—kept us pretty healthy. And so it is today, and Vicks and a hot cup of tea will alleviate the discomfort of a cold and cough.