It’s all too easy to dismiss Old Wives’ Cures as just so much hocus-pocus. In fact lots of them have more than a grain of truth in them, and it’s worth remembering that they may have survived for many generations. It’s fascinating how modern research is discovering how and why many of these health myths work. Scientists in New Zealand have discovered that honey from bees feeding on tea tree bushes kills the Helicobacter pylori bug, a common cause of stomach ulcers. Research recently published by the University of Wales has identified a substance in cod liver oil that prevents the inflammation in joints which causes the pain of arthritis. New research from Wythenshawe Hospital, Manchester, shows that asthmatics are better off with feather than synthetic foam pillows – the foam contained eight times more allergy-causing substances.

However, there are many medical myths which certainly aren’t true and to help you sort the health myths from the realities, here are some of my favourites.

Myths and Old Wives’ Tales That Don’t Work

‘An hour’s sleep before midnight is worth two hours after midnight’

Poppycock – an hour’s sleep is an hour’s sleep, no matter when you get it it has the same restorative and resting value. If you fall asleep at 11 and wake up at 6, you won’t feel any better than falling asleep at one minute past midnight and waking at 7.

‘Extra virgin olive oil is less fattening than other oils’

Wrong again, though olive oil has many health giving properties and contains lots of the good monounsaturated fatty acids, it contains the same number of calories as virtually every other fat or oil – 899 in every 100 grams.

‘Grapefruit will make your body burn extra calories and help you lose weight’

Not true, this idea stems from the days of the grapefruit diet and of course, if you eat nothing but grapefruit and hard boiled eggs you will lose weight, but you’ll also be unhealthy and very constipated. Grapefruit is a very valuable food source contributing lots of vitamin C and heart protective bioflavonoids, but it won’t make you thin.

‘Brown bread is better than white’

Another myth promoted by the advertising industry with all those village bakery romantic ads. Most brown bread is white bread with added colouring and a little extra fibre. The other nutritional differences between them are marginal. So don’t say brown, say wholemeal.

‘Cravings are your body’s way of telling you that you need something’

Sorry, you can’t use this as an excuse for another doughnut, three cream eggs or a bag of crisps. Cravings are about what you want not what you need. After all, what pregnant woman needs to eat lumps of coal or pickled cucumbers with ice cream?
‘All germs cause disease’

Another false myth as there are many bacteria which are not only beneficial to the body but essential. These good germs which live in your mouth and digestive system as well as on your skin are harmless and protect you by killing off would-be invaders. The commonest example are the type of bugs you find in live yoghurt which also help manufacture some of the B vitamins from the food passing through your intestines.

‘Washing your hair every day strips it of all goodness’

Another lie which I suspect originated from hairdressers who want you to go and have it washed in their salons once or twice a week. You wouldn’t dream of not washing your hands or face very day to remove the dirt. Doing the same with your hair keeps it and your scalp free of the grime in polluted city air.

‘Feather pillows are bad for asthma’

Grannie’s wisdom says that feather pillows are bad for anyone with asthma as the feathers can irritate the allergy. Scientific research has shown that foam pillows harbour far more dust mites and other allergic material than natural feathers, so they are in fact worse for asthmatics. Anyway as an osteopath soft feather pillows are much better for your neck as they mould to the shape of your body.

‘Strawberries make arthritis worse’

In fact the exact opposite is true, they’re good medicine for anyone suffering from arthritis, rheumatism or gout, and a few each day during the season is the cheapest and most delicious health insurance you’ll ever buy.

Health Realities – Old Wives’ Tales That Work

‘Garlic or mint relieve indigestion’

Both are true - put half a clove of crushed garlic in a cup, add boiling water, let it stand for 10 minutes, then sip. Garlic is a natural antibiotic and kills off bugs which could be affecting your stomach. Mint tea is also great for acid indigestion. Add a couple of sprigs of fresh leaves to a glass of boiling water. Stand for 5 minutes and sip when cool enough. Any mint will do but real peppermint or Moroccan mint release more of the mint oil which is an effective antacid.

‘Use mustard for hiccups, colds, coughs and backache’

This traditional English remedy really helps with all three and is much more than a condiment to go with your roast beef or bangers. One infallible cure for the hiccups is a teaspoon of mustard powder, dissolved in a teacup of hot water. If your hiccups have not stopped after this traditional country treatment, take another cup after ten minutes - it never fails.

A foot bath of two tablespoons of bath mustard in a bowl of hot water helps combat the discomfort of a day out in damp winter weather, or colds and flu. A good soak in a deep, hot mustard-bath will ease aching limbs after a hard day in the garden. And a mustard plaster, or poultice, brings rapid relief to the pain of lumbago and sciatica – don’t use mustard in any form if you are allergic to it.
A traditional cough medicine can be made with four cloves of garlic, half an ounce of mustard powder and two pints of white wine. Mix together, and keep in a corked bottle for at least one week, then use the mixture as a linctus – shake well before drinking two tablespoons four times daily.

‘Cider vinegar and honey is a great folk medicine for good health’

Cider vinegar has been used in Britain for more than six hundred years. It’s best to take it mixed with honey, ideally two teaspoons of each in a tumbler of warm water. This should be drunk first thing in the morning, before anything else, and after the mid-day and evening meals.

This ‘elixir’ helps weight loss, relieves arthritis and rheumatism, improves digestion, soothes sore throats and even reduces the pain of shingles. In this case you should also dab some neat cider vinegar onto the painful areas, as well as taking your daily dose. It’s worth taking a small bottle with you on your holiday.

‘Cloves cure toothache’

This remedy is so effective that dentists still use it in the form of clove oil. Put a few drops of clove oil on a bit of cotton wool, placing it on, or around the offending tooth. If you haven’t got the oil just chew on a clove.

‘A bread poultice draws boils’

This is the quickest way to bring a boil or abscess to a head and relieve the pain. Cut the crusts off two or three slices of bread. Put them in a sieve, pour boiling water over then mash to a thick paste with a wooden spoon. Put the paste onto a clean cotton or linen tea towel, squeeze out surplus water, and apply to the affected area. Take great care not to scald the skin, but do use the poultice as hot as you can bear. Leave in place for at least 10 minutes, then replace with a fresh hot poultice.

‘Sage cures sore throats’

Once you’ve tried this remedy you’ll never use anything else to relieve painful, sore, infected or inflamed throats. Use two teaspoons of chopped fresh leaves or one of dried to a cup of boiling water, stand for 10 minutes, strain and when cool enough use as a gargle. The antiseptic oils in sage are both antibacterial and soothing to the delicate membranes at the back of the throat. Red sage is best if you can get it but all varieties work.

‘Take cod liver oil for painful creaky joints’

This has been a favourite of the old fish wives for generations and it too, really works. It’s rich in vitamin D which protects against bone deformities and it contains special fatty acids which block the inflammation of arthritic joints. In fact latest research shows it works in just the same way as the most modern arthritis drugs but without their serious side effects.

‘Honey cures hay fever’

Here’s an old wives’ favourite with many traditional uses, and they’re all good. Try eating local honey to relieve hay fever. Bees feed on the plants that trigger hay fever and the honey ends up containing homoeopathic doses of these pollens. A small dessertspoon a couple of times a day, and one at bedtime can work wonders.
A poultice of pure honey can be used as a dressing on stubborn leg ulcers and some plastic surgeons use honey to reduce the risk of scarring after operations.

Another traditional use of honey is for digestive problems and the old wives of the Maori population in New Zealand have used a special honey from the New Zealand tea tree plant – Manuka honey – to treat stomach ulcers. Helicobacter pylori is the bacteria which is now known to cause ulcers and Manuka honey kills it dead.

‘Cabbage leaves help breast feeding’

Wrapping cabbage leaves round your breast may sound crazy but it works. They improve the flow of breast milk and prevent sore nipples – research in South Africa showed that women using cabbage leaves regularly fed their babies exclusively on breast milk for longer than those who didn’t. They also relieve the discomfort of mastitis and chronic breast pain linked to the menstrual cycle. Remove the central stalk of the large outside leaf, bruise with a wooden rolling pin, warm in a steamer, microwave, or round a hot pipe, and apply to the affected breast. You can even line your bra with them.

You can do the same thing for your arthritic joints, just wrap the cabbage leaf around the appropriate part of your body. The anti-inflammatory phytochemicals and sulphur compounds in the leaf are released by the heat and absorbed through the skin.

‘Onions cure hangovers’

Onions star in hundreds of old wives remedies, most deliciously as the famous onion soup at the end of a night on the tiles, which is part of Parisian mythology. This really works as onions speed up the removal of alcohol and other toxins from the liver. The soup is an equally good remedy for coughts, colds and bronchitis.

‘Picking dandelions makes you wet the bed’

This one is almost true. Called ‘pis en lit’ in France and ‘wet the bed’ in the north of England, dandelion is a powerful diuretic, but you have to eat the leaves. Three or four in your daily salad the week before your period will work wonders and prevent the swollen ankles, fingers and breasts. Don’t poison the dandelions on your lawn just keep the dog off them and pick the young bright green leaves from the middle.

‘An apple a day keeps the doctor away’

Apples are a rich source of a special soluble fibre called pectin. French scientists have shown that eating two a day every day provides enough pectin to reduce cholesterol levels by around 10 percent. Add the vitamin C, potassium and folic acid and you’ve got a brilliant prescription for good teeth and gums, heart protection and a long and healthy life.

‘You burn more calories chewing celery than you gain by eating it’

At 8 calories in 100 grams of celery – around three whole sticks – you’d have to swallow it whole to end up with a surplus calorie intake. Even modest chewing will leave you with a debit balance in the calorie column and if you chew thoroughly you’ll probably lose a couple of ounces by the time you’ve swallowed it. The only nutrients you get are some folic acid, quite a lot of potassium and a little vitamin C – but how much cottage cheese and celery can you eat?
People may scoff at some old wives' remedies, but most of them have stood the test of time, are basically safe and without side effects, and usually quite pleasant. So before you explore your medicine chest or dash to the chemist why not try some for yourself.