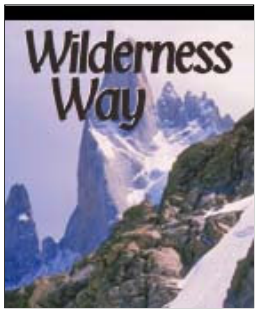

This article is part of Wilderness Way VOLUME 1, ISSUE 4. You may view more articles here or order this issue or a subscription here.

WW Home

Featured Articles

Back Issues

Message Board

Earth Medicine: TALC

by T. R. Zimmermann

At the first crack of dawn's early light, the novice hunter began to painfully dress himself in preparation for the day's hunt. With his quiver slung over one shoulder and an unstrung bow in his hand, he exited from the bachelor's quarters to join his companions gathering at the meeting place in the center of the village.

He walked with a slight limp, trying to appear as normal as possible. But the sub chief in charge of the hunt was quick to notice his discomfort and, after briefly questioning him about his condition, sent the hunter straight to the Medicine Man for treatment.

The clan required its hunters to be in the best of health to assure a successful hunt. Unless they were in excellent physical shape and able to hold a bow steady, there would be no fresh meat for the pot or the drying racks.

The young man quietly arrived at the Medicine Man's hearth inside the Great Lodge. He shyly tried to stand to one side without being noticed. His condition was very embarrassing, not the normal ills and complaints common to hunters.

Besides, too many womenfolk were up and about. If they knew of his problem, he felt he would have to live alone, like a bear in the woods, for the rest of his life.

The wise healer finally noticed the young hunter leaning at an odd angle against a nearby lodge pole, obviously suffering great distress. Beckoning him over, the Medicine Man quizzed the man about his problem, noting the symptoms.

What had began as a burning itch between the toes of his right foot was now spreading like wildfire across the young man's groin. And, no amount of scratching or rubbing with bear grease gave any long-term comfort. He was desperate.

The Medicine Man knew about this type of condition and assured the hunter the cure was simple. Reaching into his remedy bag, he removed a leather cylinder full of a white powder. A measure was poured in the center of a square of soft cloth and a cord tied behind it to trap the remedy.

His directions were the following: dust the powder on the affected area and enjoy instant relief.

The healing powder utilized was none other than the mineral talc. Just what exactly is talc? Where does it come from? How is it formed? Why does it make good medicine? These questions and others will be answered in this article.

Talc is a soft, hydrous compound composed of magnesium silicate, also known as soapstone, steatite, or grease rock. The mineral is widespread, often occurring in limestone formations, eroded clays, and in metamorphosed schist and gneiss strata where it forms either thick veins or as a mass of stone.

Sometimes mistaken for dolomite, near which it often occurs, talc is easily distinguished from

other rocks by its soapy or greasy feeling when rubbed and by its softness. With a hardness of only 1, talc is simple to scratch with a fingernail or to cut with a knife blade without damage to the edge of the steel blade.

Talc is a secondary mineral formed by mineralization which occurs deep beneath the earth's crust. It is generally found in metamorphic rocks where water charged with carbon dioxide has decomposed overlying minerals rich in magnesium, silicate, and calcium. Traces of the minerals aluminum and iron are often found in many talcs.

Trapped in open eroded pockets of rock formations located thousands of feet beneath the ground, the mineral-rich sludge undergoes a dramatic change. Intense pressure and a high-to-low range of extreme temperatures generated by the magma core below create a hydrothermal-like oven effect in the pockets.

Inside this natural oven, basic rock minerals are altered into new forms. Over time, the sludge eventually changes into the mineral talc.

Talc rarely crystallizes into tabular crystals. Usually it forms foliated, radiating scales resembling rosettes and compact masses. Its colors vary accordingly too, coming in white, brown, green, or blue tints. Scratching a piece on an unglazed ceramic tile produces a white streak.

Talc can be splintered into large thin sheets with a pearly luster. When held against a bright light, the sheet is either transparent or translucent with a milky background.

Splintered sheets of talc are elastic but not quite as flexible as sheets of mica. Too much bend will break a sheet into two pieces. Cleavage is perfect in one direction with an irregular fracture. Specific gravity is 2.58 to 2.83.

Talc is easy to crush into a powder. Powdered talc has a white color and is insolvent in nitric acid. When roasted in an open pan over a fire, the powder becomes very dry and flaky.

When using talc as a topical medicine or internal remedy, it must first be crushed into a fine powder. To do so, put hand-size chunks of talc into a canvas bag and place on a firm surface. Use a hard rock or iron hammer to repeatedly pound the bag, crushing the mineral into a fine powder with the consistency of finely grained powdered or confectionery sugar. Run the end product through a flour-sifter to remove large pieces hidden in the powder before using as medicine.

Talc powder is used topically to ease skin inflammation, to comfort chapped skin, and to soothe irritating heat rash. The fine powder acts as a shield, protecting the sensitive wound site against contact with air, moisture, and both organic and inorganic irritants.

Powdered talc mixes readily with pure olive oil or high grade mineral oil, forming a suspension or emollient. It is especially valuable as a healing remedy against infected skin conditions, including scabies and deep-seated ulcers.

Scabies are caused by lymph-feeding mites or chiggers, which burrow beneath the skin. The bites create a burning itch and result in hundreds of tiny sores when scratched. Ulcers form when harmful disease-causing germs invade a sore or wound site. Most are antibiotic-resistant.

Internally, talc powder is often used as a substitute for the fine clay, kaolin, in anti-diarrhea medicines. A spoonful of talc added to a glass of warm water and taken as needed, slows intestinal contractions and eases diarrhea misery.

However, take care when administering talc as a medicine. While it makes a good soothing remedy for irritations and to treat diarrhea, it is technically a rock poison. Avoid ingesting too much. One side effect from over-dosing on talc is a compacted colon requiring hospitalization and painful excavation with a spoon to remove the mass from the rectum.

In other words, the cure can become worse than the disease itself. Nevertheless, talc is a good medicine when utilized in a reasonable way.

Caution is also advised when preparing talc into a medicinal powder, as inhalation of the fine powder over a long period of time can lead to lung cancer. Full of asbestos-like fibers and scales, talc powder can clog the air passages inside the lungs.

Talc has commercial value. Deposits of talc can be found throughout the world, mainly in regions where metamorphic activity has occurred, such as in parts of Austria, China, England, France, Germany, India, Quebec, and in the United States. The leading producers in North America are Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Montana, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.

Industrially valuable, talc is mined primarily for its fire and acid resistance, as a poor conductor of electricity, and as a filler agent. It has hundreds of manufacturing purposes, including use in paints, fire extinguishing foams, lubricants, ceramics, glass, kitchen cleansers, household articles, polishes, paper, synthetic rubber, insecticides, detergents, and is used by the electricity industry.

Huge molded ceramic insulators used on high voltage power grids and by electric generating stations are composed mainly of talc and fine clays. Many electricity-producing nuclear reactors depend on talc-based resistors for their safe operation.

Millions of tons of talc are utilized each year by the toiletry trade. Talc is essential in the manufacture of talcum powder, baby powder, cosmetics, soaps, deodorants, creams, and lotions. In fact, many beautifying concoctions contain little more than a sweetly scented flavoring, a color tint, and over 95% talc powder.

Talc has two little-known useful purposes--talc mixed with equal portions of sulfur makes a superior foot powder and a chigger/tick bite preventative.

As a foot powder, the talc-sulfur mix prevents the growth of athlete's foot fungus, scabbiness, and irritation and shields feet from blister and bunion formation. Always dust toes and soles of feet before putting on socks in the morning. The powder reduces foot problems during the day and makes walking in rough terrains much easier.

To make a powder applicator, pour a measure of the above mixture into a cotton sock, shaking the powder down to the toe of the sock. Then, make a loop in the remaining end of the sock, pushing the knot tightly against the trapped powder to hold it in place.

To use, hold applicator over the injury site and pat it with a finger of opposite hand, releasing a thin layer of powder. Reapply as needed.

The talc-sulfur mix makes a good chigger and tick bite prevention remedy, too. Dust socks, shoes, and shins of legs heavily before venturing into chigger and tick country.

Those who live primitively are relatively independent and self-contained. They make what they need from nature's raw products.

Back to the Top