

Folk Medicine/Cultural Health Practices of African Americans Factsheet

African Americans commonly use home remedies to manage their health. Folk home remedies are defined as any health practices (exclusive of over-the-counter pharmaceutical drugs) used at home before seeking professional health care assistance.¹ Remedies are manufactured from herbs, plants, animal, and mineral substances.² Spiritual practices such as prayer or use of a spiritual healer can also be considered a home remedy or complementary alternative medicine.³

Remedy Examples

Food: Drinking water or cider vinegar to reduce blood pressure or cleanse one's body from illness. Epsom salts for relief of indigestion.⁴ Spices, herbal medicines, teas, honey, lemons for bronchitis and other items for other chronic illness.

Non-Food: Vaseline for dry skin, cuts or scrapes, and alcohol for muscle or joint pain, tingling or throbbing new one⁵



Beliefs

Some Blacks or African Americans have held the belief that good health is associated with luck or success and illness or disease is associated with bad luck, poverty, unemployment or fate and therefore may only see a physician when home remedy attempts have failed.⁶ Others believe that disease or illness come from natural or unnatural illness causes. **Natural illnesses** occur due to **exposure to the environment**, for example developing pneumonia when exposed to the cold. **Unnatural illnesses are** considered a punishment from God or a result of a spell cast to cause diseases like cancer. Many cultural and ethnic groups use folk medicine combined with Western medicine.⁶

Why are some African Americans using folk medicine or home remedies?

- Cultural tradition
- Distrust of the medical system
- Discriminatory practices and unfair treatment in American health care facilities

Why is it important to understand what folk medicine and health beliefs are?

- It can affect communication between provider and patient and the treatment plan
- Patients may be using many sources of care
- Treatments used may be potentially harmful⁷

HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONER & FOLK MEDICINE QUICK TIPS

- ✚ Assess your patients for use of cultural or folklore practices
- ✚ Ensure they are not engaging in a practice that is harmful or interfering with the treatment plan
- ✚ Assess whether it is efficacious (beneficial) neutral (no effect but no harm), or dysfunctional (may cause harm)
- ✚ Educate your patient of possible risk associated with using home remedies
- ✚ If home remedies are found to be efficacious or neutral, they may be kept at the patient's bedside

References

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