



Tissue Viability Service

Medical honey simplified

A patient guide to the role of honey in
wound management

Medical honey is a natural, non-toxic agent that has been used to treat wounds for thousands of years. This ancient remedy is often used within wound dressings to reduce or stop the growth of a wide range of bacteria (antimicrobial) which are commonly found in wound beds.

How does medical honey work?

In order to survive bacteria need water. Honey draws this fluid away which in turn damages the internal structures of the bacteria cells.

Due to this action, patients sometimes experience a stinging or drawing sensation. This is rare and is often related to additional factors to do with your health rather than the honey. Those patients who have experienced this often report this resolves soon after application or with appropriate pain medication.

It is worth considering that certain treatments may cause temporary discomfort however the long-term benefits of restoring wound health and your wellbeing should be a key focus.

For example certain antibiotics can make you temporarily feel sick or give you an upset stomach, however by taking them the long-term benefits of fighting something like a chest infection can outweigh this.

It is important to seek support from your healthcare professional in order to make an informed choice regarding the benefits of using honey.

Honey is effective at:

- treating local wound bed infection or reducing increased bacteria levels.
- reducing wound odour caused by high bacteria levels.
- reducing inflammation at the wound bed.
- assisting with the removal of dead tissue within the wound bed.

What are honey-impregnated dressings?

These are a range of sterile wound dressings impregnated with honey that are applied directly to the wound surface.

Honey dressings can vary in appearance due to the different types of materials used. Some maybe a seaweed-based sheet or rope, others may be a impregnated gauze or gel or ointment.

Following a thorough assessment, your healthcare professional will suggest a dressing based upon your needs and wound management objectives.

Why do I need honey?

You may be prescribed a short course of medical honey if you have a wound that has been diagnosed as having high levels of bacteria or local wound bed infection.

Honey can be used in a variety of wounds including:

- long-term ulceration, for example pressure ulcer, lower leg venous ulceration

- local infection or high bacterial levels at the wound bed
- wound beds with a high level of dead tissue requiring safe removal
- malodorous wounds
- fungating wounds secondary to cancer
- burn sites
- surgical wounds
- graft sites

Why can I not use table honey?

The regulated honey-based wound care products can be perceived as expensive and often table honey found in supermarkets may be considered a cheaper alternative.

In laboratory tests, table honey has shown to be less effective at reducing bacteria in wounds and contains a wider range of microbial spores when compared with sterilised honey.

The presence of a wound can create a range of management challenges such as those mentioned on page one. Therefore sterile wound dressings are considered a safer and more effective multipurpose treatment for managing wounds.

Seek advice from your healthcare professional before using table honeys as this may affect wound healing outcomes.

Is medical honey safe?

There is clinical evidence to support the safe use of honey in wound care. You must advise your healthcare professional if you have ever had any reaction to bee related or honey-based products to prevent an adverse reaction.

Honey is safe to use on those patients with diabetes as there is no evidence to support it significantly affects blood sugar levels.

Honey has not been shown to be toxic to the wound bed or to the body. As yet there are no reported cases of honey-resistant strains of bacteria.

The recommended time for honey application is two weeks. A nursing assessment following this period will aim to determine an agreed ongoing management plan.

Summary

- Honey is a safe method to reduce high level bacteria levels in wound beds.
- Please inform your healthcare professional if you have a known allergy to any components of the suggested products.
- Please contact your healthcare professional if you are concerned or have any questions regarding your treatment plan.

Comments, suggestions and complaints

We are committed to providing a high standard of professional support and advice. To help us maintain this we welcome any feedback that you have regarding your experiences of our service. Please share your comments, suggestions or complaints with a member of the team.

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). PALS provides advice and support to patients, their families and carers and can help to resolve any problems, concerns or complaints that you may have. You can contact PALS free on telephone 0800 328 7971.

Notes

If you need the information in another language or format please ask us

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The Tissue Viability Service is part of our Older People Directorate.