



Tissue Viability Service

Medical honey simplified

A guide to the role of honey in wound management for healthcare professionals

Medical honey is a broad-spectrum antimicrobial 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 which is often found in wound beds.

What is an antimicrobial?

The term antimicrobial encompasses a wide range of agents that work in different ways to stop bacteria multiplying and forming colonies.

This is achieved by damaging the internal structure of the bacterial cell.

Other antimicrobial agents include silver and iodine. These agents can help towards either reducing the risk of or actively treating a local wound bed infection or high bacteria levels which can delay wound healing.

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. Patients sometimes experience a stinging or drawing sensation as a result of this. However this is rare and often resolves soon after application and/or with appropriate pain medication.

Often patients may refuse treatment on this basis. It is important to support the patient by identifying the benefits of the use of honey.

Certain treatments may cause discomfort however the long-term benefits of restoring wound/ patient health can provide a positive focus.

The side effects of some antibiotic therapies versus the long-term benefit of treatment can be a good example of this.

Honey is effective at:

- treating local wound bed infection, critical colonisation and/or biofilms.
- reducing wound odour caused by high bacteria levels.
- reducing wound bed inflammation.
- assisting with autolytic debridement of dead tissue within the wound bed.

Medical honey versus 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 possess a lower antibacterial activity and a wider range of microbial species when compared with sterilised honey.

The presence of a wound can create a range of management challenges such as those mentioned earlier in this leaflet. Therefore sterile wound dressings are considered a safer and more effective multi-purpose treatment for managing wounds.

What are honey impregnated dressings?

A range of sterile wound dressings impregnated with medical honey that are applied directly to the wound surface. Dressing choice should be based upon a thorough patient and wound assessment. Dressing choice will also depend on the type of wound and the management needs of the time.

Honey dressings are available as:

- alginate sheet/ rope
- tulle
- gel sheet
- gel/ ointment in a tube

When would I prescribe honey?

You may prescribe a short course of medical honey if you have a wound bed that is critically colonised or locally infected.

This can often be used for the following:

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

Is medical honey safe?

There is clinical evidence to support the safe use of honey in wound care.

You must ascertain whether your patient has ever had any reaction to honey-based or bee-related products to prevent an adverse reaction.

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

Honey has not shown to be toxic to the wound bed or within the body.

As yet there are no reported cases of honey-resistant strains of bacteria however this is not to say emergence of such is not possible.

Honey should only be used for a maximum of two weeks as per trust guidelines.

Summary

- The controlled use of a honey-impregnated topical dressing can be effective in managing clinically diagnosed critical colonisation or local wound infection.

Please contact the tissue viability team for further guidance on the use of honey if required on telephone 01865 904 959.

- Refer to the full trust guidelines for support in the diagnosis and management of bacterial loads in wounds.

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.