

Medical uses

In the days before modern medicine, the birch tree was an important source of folk remedies throughout the northern hemisphere. Used by many different tribes and civilisations.

LEAVES AND TWIGS

A tea brewed of the fresh or dried leaves was extensively used as a spring tonic, much needed in a season when fresh vegetables were not available. Birch tea contains some vitamin C and flavonoids as well as cleansing properties. It kills off harmful bacteria in kidneys and the urinary tract, lowers blood cholesterol and stimulates bile flow. People have used it with success for urinary infections, gout and as a 'blood cleanser' in degenerative diseases, such as arthritis and rheumatism. Birch leaves are effective in lowering blood pressure, and an infusion of birch leaves will cool a fever and therefore aid the symptoms of the common cold. Very strong brews were used as disinfectant lotions for skin diseases, such as herpes, facial spots, and so on.

SAP

The sap has similar, some say superior-, medicinal properties to the leaf tea.

During Napoleon's ill-fated attempt to conquer Russia, his surgeon-general was so impressed with the efficacy of Birch sap, that he called it "a universal panacea for peasants and gentry alike". The carbohydrates contained in this tonic juice were also a valuable addition to the spring diet when food was often extremely scarce in the cold Northern climate.

BARK

The bark is high in betulin and betulinic acid, phytochemicals which have potential as pharmaceuticals. The oil from the bark and buds keeps away insects and gnats, which are plentiful in the Northern areas. This same oil is also useful as a lotion for eczema and psoriasis and, due to its anti-septic properties, has been used in the manufacture of medicated soaps. Distillation of the bark yields Birch tar oil, an astringent ingredient of ointments for eczema and psoriasis. Native Americans boiled the bark to make poultices for minor wounds. An oil made by distilling the bark of the sweet birch was traditionally used for bladder infections, rheumatism, gout and nerve pain.

SCIENTIFIC CONSTITUENTS AND ACTIONS

(Source: Bastyr College of Natural Medicine On-Line Database)

Constituents: Flavonoids, mainly hyperoside, with luteolin and quercetin glycosides. Actions: Diuretic, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, tonic.

Indications: Birch leaves act as an effective remedy for cystitis and other infections of the urinary system as well as removing excess water from the body. Perhaps because of this cleansing diuretic activity, the plant has been used for gout, rheumatism and mild arthritic pain. The bark will ease muscle pain if it is applied externally, putting the fresh, wet internal side of the bark against the skin.

CURRENT RESEARCH EXPLORING "BETULIN" AND "BETULINIC ACID"

(Source: Phytochemical and Ethnobotanical Databases of United States Department of Agriculture.)

Betulin and Betulinic acid have shown activity that inhibits skin cancer.

White Birch Bark (Betulin)

Anticarcinomic; Antifeedant; Antiflu; Antiinflammatory; Antitumor; Antiviral; Aphidifuge; Cytotoxic; Hypolipemic; Prostaglandin-Synthesis-Inhibitor

Sweet Birch Bark -(Betulin and Betulinic Acid)

Anticarcinomic ; AntiHIV; Antiinflammatory; Antimalarial; Antimelanomic ; Antiplasmodial; Antitumor; Antiviral; Cytotoxic; Prostaglandin-Synthesis-Inhibitor

(This information has been gathered from a variety of international sources and we cannot confirm its accuracy. It is not intended as medical advice.)