



Can local honey fight off allergies?

by Megy Karydes | Jun 23, 2014

“One teaspoon of honey a day can help provide relief for those who suffer seasonal allergies,” says [Dr. Tony Vancauwelaert](#), a family medicine physician with Swedish Covenant Medical Group who also happens to be the head beekeeper of two hives on the rooftop of the hospital.

Dr. Vancauwelaert believes local honey is a natural remedy for pollen allergies as well as other health ailments, from sore throats to mild cuts. The wax produced by honeybees may also alleviate pain for arthritic sufferers.

How does consuming local honey on a daily basis benefit those who suffer from pollen allergies? According to Dr. Vancauwelaert, pollen is the culprit of most allergy symptoms including dry, itchy eyes and congestion. A small amount of pollen is found in raw honey. Consuming just one teaspoon of local honey (produced within a 50-mile radius of one’s home) daily, even through the winter months, gradually exposes you to the pollen. This exposure works to slowly build up one’s tolerance to the pollen, which then reduces the severity of those symptoms and provides relief during high pollen count seasons like spring and fall.

Dr. Vancauwelaert notes that consuming honey as an allergy remedy is considered a homeopathic remedy; limited scientific research confirms the health benefits of the sweet food. However, he stands by the success he’s had with many of his patients who’ve suffered from allergies and continues to recommend it as a treatment option.

Dr. Vancauwelaert cites one informal study conducted by students at Xavier University in New Orleans that produced promising results. Researchers divided participants into three groups: seasonal allergy sufferers, year-round allergy sufferers and non-allergy sufferers. These groups were further divided into three subgroups with some people taking two teaspoons of local honey per day, others taking the same amount of non-local honey each day and the final subgroup not taking honey at all. The Xavier students found that after six weeks, allergy sufferers from both ‘honey’ categories suffered fewer symptoms and that the group taking local honey reported the most improvement.

“Several of the study participants asked if they could keep the remaining honey after the experiment concluded,” says Dr. Vancauwelaert.

Dr. Vancauwelaert is a self-taught apiarist (another term for beekeeper), and insists that with education, keeping bees is a safe, easy and a critical part of our landscape today. Bees are dying in record numbers primarily because of toxins polluting the environment. Two books in particular helped him as he began researching his hobby, and he highly recommends them for those interested in adding hives to their backyard: *Beekeeping for Dummies* and *The Book of Honey*.

When he's not keeping an eye on the Queen Bees in his hives at home or on the rooftop of Swedish Covenant Hospital, he's recommending honey to his patients as a health remedy whenever it's appropriate and advocating for the winged insects whenever he can.

Everything else you wanted to know about honey

Ever wondered if darker honey tastes better than lighter honey? Do honeybees and bumblebees co-exist?

Dr. Vancauwelaert recently gave a presentation about bees and his rooftop beehives to a packed audience at Swedish Covenant Hospital. Attendees were taken to the rooftop to view the two hives and learned everything from the history of bees and why honeybees are so important to our ecosystem, to how to start their own beehive if they were interested. A representative from Whole Foods Sauganash also provided samples of various types of honey for guests to try including light clover honey to the earthy and mossy tasting buckwheat honey.

Besides questions about the health impacts of honey, participants also got their general questions about the sweetener answered. Neighborhood resident Amy Keller brought her three school-aged children to hear Dr. Vancauwelaert because she felt it would be a great learning experience for them.

Dr. Vancauwelaert discussed the various types of honey available in the marketplace and cautioned against using pasteurized honey. "Pasteurized honey is treated with heat which destroys all of the health benefits," he notes. He added that children under the age of one should not be introduced to honey at all because of the risk of infant botulism, a rare but serious form of food poisoning.

During the presentation, Keller's son asked if honeybees and bumblebees can co-exist. The answer? Yes, they can co-exist, although they are not drawn to each other, says Dr. Vancauwelaert.

He also gave a simple answer for which type of honey – dark or light – tastes better.

"Whichever one tastes best to you," he says.