

Medical Benefit

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Using Sour Lemon to Treat the Common Cold

Praise be to Allāh, Lord of the worlds, and blessings and peace be upon our master Muḥammad, his family, and his companions.

A question was received from one of our beloved readers asking whether **sour lemon** is always beneficial in treating the common cold.

Answer:

The cause of the common cold is the descent of thin, wet, and flowing substances from the brain toward the nasal passages.

These substances obstruct the sense of smell and may extend to the eyes and facial skin. One of the causes is the blockage of pores due to an external cooling effect on the brain, such as sitting in a bathroom or in front of a fan after exposure to heat, standing in the sun, using hot medicines such as marjoram and

sage, excessive fullness of the body from foods and drinks, or a naturally cold temperament of the brain. Other causes also exist.

Some Signs:

If the cold is caused by **hotness**, then the brain's waste matter is thin and produces a burning sensation. The nasal discharge is irritating and touching it may cause discomfort. Sour lemon does **not** benefit this type of cold. There may also be a burning sensation in the face and eyes. If the discharge reaches the throat, it may cause inflammation and irritation. If mucus is expelled, it may appear yellowish or reddish.

There may also be nasal blockage accompanied by burning and stinging sensations.

If the cold is caused by **coldness**, then the brain's waste matter is thicker, the nasal discharge is cold, and there is heaviness and blockage in the nose without the burning and stinging sensations.

If the discharge reaches the throat, it remains thin and does not cause the same degree of irritation.

The common cold benefits from this remedy, and recovery from it is expected if it is caused by **coldness**, especially when the cold element is greater than the hot element.

The material causing the common cold is divided into **four types**:

1. **Yellow Bile-dominant**
2. **Sanguine (Blood)**
3. **Phlegmatic**
4. **Black Bile-dominant**

Each humor has its own distinguishing signs.

As for **hot colds**, they are treated with cooling medicines and cooling foods.

As for **cold colds**, they are treated with hot medicines and hot foods. In hot conditions, the body is purified by bloodletting and by

facilitating the evacuation of hot humors. In cold conditions, hot measures are used, such as hot, aromatic substances, and heating the head with warmed cloths until the hotness reaches the brain and helps maintain that state.

For **phlegmatic cold conditions**, medicines that help expel phlegm from the head are used, whether taken as drinks or administered through nasal applications.

This is mentioned in **Kitab al-Mizan fi al-Tibb** and **Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb**.

The scholars of traditional medicine followed this principle in treating such conditions and others: **treating by opposites**, meaning treating hotness with coldness, coldness with hotness, wetness with dryness, and dryness with wetness.

Ibn al-Baytar mentioned in his book *Al-Jami' li-Mufradat al-Adwiyah* various remedies for the common cold and classified colds as hot, cold, wet, and dry. Examples include:

Frankincense (Luban al-Kurmani)

Its temperament is **hot and dry in the second degree**. It is beneficial for those with phlegm and helps open obstructions affecting the brain and head. It is useful for **wet colds caused by phlegm**.

Quince Seed Oil

It tends toward coldness and is beneficial for conditions involving excess blood, hot headaches, and **hot colds**.

Marigold Flower Oil (Qandoul)

This oil comes from a tree known in the Levant as **Qandoul**. It is **hot and dry in the second degree**. Smelling it may help with headaches caused by coldness, colds, catarrh, facial paralysis, and chronic cold headaches.

Costus (Qust)

Costus has two varieties: one is the **white marine costus**, and the other is the **Indian costus**, which is dark black, light in weight, and bitter in taste. Both are **hot and dry**, though the Indian variety is hotter, reaching the third degree. They help dry excess phlegm in the head and are useful for catarrh (common cold).

Narcissus (Narjis)

Its temperament is **hot and dry in the third degree**. Smelling it benefits **cold-type colds** and has a strong dissolving action.

As also mentioned in **Al-Mu'tamad fi al-Adwiyah al-Mufradah**, the common cold is classified into hot, cold, wet, and dry types.

Examples include:

Nutmeg

Hot and dry in the fourth degree. Beneficial for **cold-type colds**.

Violet (Banafsaj)

One of the flowering plants. Cold in the second degree and wet in the third degree; some say cold and wet in the first degree.

Drinking it may aggravate a cold-type catarrh.

Myrrh Tree

Hot and dry in the second degree. Beneficial for colds caused by coldness.

Costus (Qust)

As mentioned above, it comes in two varieties, white marine and Indian. Both are hot and dry and help dry excessive phlegm in the head, making them beneficial for catarrh.

Mint

Hot and dry. Beneficial for coughs, catarrh, nasal discharge, and conditions resulting from excess wetness.

Narcissus

Hot in the third degree and dry in the second degree. When smelled, it benefits headaches caused by phlegm and black bile, opens blockages in the head, and helps with cold-type catarrh.

Conclusion

Physicians state that treatment of the common cold should be based on the principle of **opposites**:

- A **hot, wet, blood-related cold** is treated with **cooling and drying herbs and foods**.
- A **cold, wet, phlegmatic cold** is treated with **warming and drying herbs and foods**.
- A **hot, dry, bilious cold** is treated with **cooling and wetting herbs and foods**.
- A **cold, dry, black bile-dominant cold** is treated with **hot and wet herbs and foods**.

Lemon

If the illness is caused by a single humor, one simple remedy may be sufficient. If it is caused by a mixture of humors, the physician combines medicines according to the proportions of the mixed humors.

Ibn al-Baytar mentioned in his writings, as did Dawud al-Antaki in *Al-Mu'tamad fi al-Adwiyah al-Mufradah*, that:

Lemon juice is cold and dry, either at the end of the second degree or the beginning of the third degree. It benefits hot conditions such as excess blood and yellow bile. However, it is not suitable for those with weak nerves or a predominately cold temperament, and it may harm people of cold constitution.

We say that a fundamental medical principle is that flavors indicate the nature of medicines. Flavors that are **astringent, puckering, and sour** indicate a **cold temperament**. Sourness, in particular, signifies coldness, as mentioned by **Ibn Rushd** in *Al-Kulliyat fi al-Tibb*.

Therefore, physicians generally agree that:

Sour lemon juice is cold and dry.

There is no disagreement regarding this because of its sour, astringent, and constricting qualities. Thus, it may be harmful to those whose illness is cold in nature or who have a cold temperament.

Dr. Jamlan also stated in his book *Ghurrah al-Mufradat* that:

Sour lemon is harmful in cold-type catarrh (the common cold).

From this, it is understood that:

- **Cold, wet (phlegmatic) colds**
- **Cold, dry (melancholic) colds**

may be worsened by the use of sour lemon, according to the principles established by traditional physicians, who held that it is harmful to people of cold temperament.

Scholars who relied on humoral medicine often used it as a reference for understanding dietary effects. For example, **Shaykh al-Harari** (may Allāh have mercy on him) was asked whether honey harms some people. He replied:

“Honey harms those whose nature is dominated by hotness.”

The scholars mentioned this, including **Al-Ghazali** and others. It is therefore forbidden for someone who is harmed by honey to consume it.

End of Shaykh’s statement.

We say:

Honey has a **hot, yellow bile-dominant temperament** in the first degree and a **dry temperament** in the second degree. Therefore, it may be harmful to those whose constitution is dominated by hotness and dryness (a yellow bile-dominant temperament), as explained by Shaykh Abd Allah al-Harari (may Allāh have mercy on him).

Likewise, when the Shaykh was asked about **smoking**, he replied:

“Cigarettes are harmful to those whom they harm, and disliked (makruh) for those whom they do not harm. As for one who benefits from them and is not harmed by them, they are not disliked. This is similar to one whose wetness predominates.”

End of the Shaykh’s statement.

We also say:

Tobacco has a **hot, dry, yellow bile-dominant temperament**.

Therefore, if consumed by a person whose constitution is already dominated by hotness and dryness, it may harm him. However, if consumed by someone whose constitution is dominated by coldness and wetness, it may benefit him by reducing excessive wetness, since hotness and dryness reduce cold, wet substances.

This is based on the words of Shaykh Abd Allah al-Harari (may Allah have mercy on him).

From this, it becomes clear that scholars relied upon **humoral medicine** in their medical rulings, especially since our Shaykh (may Allāh have mercy on him) considered the ancient physicians to be more reliable than modern physicians.

We also say:

It has become common among the public that **lemons are rich in Vitamin C and therefore beneficial for colds in general.**

However, this is an oversimplification and does not conform to the principles of humoral medicine, nor even fully to modern medicine.

Dr. Douglas M. and colleagues, in a publication entitled:

“Vitamin C for Preventing and Treating the Common Cold”

reported that over the past forty years, many scientific researchers conducted experiments to determine the effect of Vitamin C on preventing and treating the common cold. More than

thirty clinical trials involving over eleven thousand participants who took Vitamin C daily were reviewed.

When the results were examined as a whole, the researchers concluded that:

Vitamin C does not prevent or cure the common cold in the general population.

However, individuals engaged in intense physical activity, such as athletes, may benefit from Vitamin C supplementation.

The authors also mention that after reviewing **72 studies**, published in **January 2012**, no major effect of Vitamin C on preventing colds was established. At most, it may slightly reduce the duration of cold symptoms.