Dear Alice,

What natural food or herb can help soothe stomach ulcers?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Ulcers can really eat at you. They typically occur in the lining of the top of the small intestine, the duodenum (duodenal ulcers), or the stomach (peptic ulcers). Common culprits of stomach ulcers include the *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) bacteria and prolonged use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen. To learn more about ulcers, check out the Go Ask Alice! Q&A Ulcers [2] in the General Health [3] archives. Although many individuals take prescription medicines to treat their ulcers, many have sought relief for ulcers by incorporating or eliminating certain foods from their diets or taking nutritional supplements and herbs. It is, however, crucial to note that herbal supplements aren't regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Consequently, people tend to have inconsistent and unreliable experiences with them. In cases where herbal supplements are used to treat ulcers, it's recommended that they aren't used as the primary method of care (more on this later!). Before you incorporate any of these natural remedies into your routine, it's best that you talk with your health care provider to determine the appropriate treatment for you.

There are many factors to evaluate before turning to natural remedies for *H. pylori* infections, ranging from their effectiveness to ease of use. Natural remedies have been found to have differing efficacy rates, which means there is no simple answer for what does or doesn't work. These efficacy rates may also be dependent on other factors, such as how long they've been consumed and the individual's genetic makeup.

Some foods and drinks that have been found to be somewhat helpful in the treatment of *H. pylori* infections include:

- Those rich in antioxidants, specifically green tea, red wine, and cranberries
- Foods high in flavonoids, specifically garlic and licorice
- Certain oils, primarily caraway oil and olive oil
- Prunus mume (otherwise known as ?Japanese apricot? or ?Chinese plum?)
- Broccoli
- Certain bee-made products, specifically honey
Some the foods listed above, such as garlic and cranberry, also come in the form of herbal supplements. Of the natural remedies listed above, green tea, broccoli, red wine, cranberries, and prunus mume have been found to be the most effective. Some of these remedies may be better suited for certain populations; for example, cranberry juice has only been found effective for women, when consumed over a long period of time. Additionally due to their antibacterial and anti-inflammatory effects, aside from treating ulcers, broccoli, cranberries, and licorice may alleviate other gastro-intestinal issues. While they may not address an existing \textit{H. pylori} infection, they may provide protection against future infections and subsequent ulcers. Though some herbal supplements may be effective in treating ulcers, it's recommended that they're used in conjunction with antibiotics instead of as the primary form of treatment.

Given that herbal supplements are not regulated by the FDA, it's vital to exercise caution when exploring the market. Just because something is natural doesn't mean it's safe. The best defense against falling prey to any tricks or scams is to be an informed consumer, so here are some helpful tips to keep in mind:

- Keep an eye out for extreme language, particularly false promises of complete safety or no adverse effects. Similarly, no herbal supplement can treat, cure, or erase any effects of a disease.
- Look up ingredients, especially through the National Institute of Health's (NIH) Dietary Supplement Label Database \cite{4}, and learn more about their uses and safety.
- Check for safety alerts and advisories on supplements, recalls, or recently discovered side-effects through dependable governmental websites, such as FDA's Safety Alert and Advisory website \cite{5} and NIH's Alerts and Advisories website \cite{6}.

Ultimately, when it comes to natural remedies, health care providers can provide the best diagnosis and treatment plan that best suits your needs. Until then, you may consider limiting your caffeine and alcohol consumption, maintaining a balanced diet, and getting a full night's rest to ease some of your symptoms.

Here's hoping that soon the ulcers are the sore losers!

Alice!

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