

SPICE OF LIFE - HALDI

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Turmeric is known as the “golden spice” as well as the “spice of life.” It has been used in India as a medicinal plant, and held sacred from time immemorial. Turmeric has strong associations with the socio-cultural life of the people of the Indian subcontinent. This “earthy herb of the Sun” with the orange-yellow rhizome was regarded as the “herb of the Sun” by the people of the Vedic period.

No wonder the ancients regarded turmeric as the Oushadhi, the healing herb, the most outstanding herb, the one herb above all others (Jager, 1997). Turmeric has at least 6000 yr of documented history of its use as medicine and in many socio-religious practices.

Turmeric is probably a native of Southeast Asia, where many related species of *Curcuma* occur wildly, though turmeric itself is not known to occur in the wild. Turmeric is cultivated most extensively in India, followed by Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines. On a small scale, it is also grown in most tropical regions in Africa, America, and Pacific Ocean Islands. India is the largest producer, consumer, and exporter of turmeric.

The name turmeric has originated from the Medieval Latin name *terramerita*, which became *terremerite* of French, meaning deserved earth or meritorious earth, a name by which powdered turmeric was known in commerce.

Ancient Indians had given many names for turmeric, each one denoting a particular quality as listed below;

Ranjani Denotes that which gives color

Mangal prada Bringing luck

Krimighni Killing worms, antimicrobial

Mahaghni Indicates antidiabetic properties

Anestha Not offered for sacrifice or *homa*

Haridra Indicating that it is dear to *Hari* (Lord Krishna)

Varna-datri That gives color, indicating its use as enhancer of body complexion

Hemaragi Having golden color

Bhadra Denotes auspicious or lucky

Pavitra Holy

Hridayavilasini Giving delight to heart, charming

Shobhna Brilliant, indicating the brilliant color

Turmeric has been in use from ancient time as a spice, food preservative, coloring agent, and cosmetic and in the traditional systems of medicine (*Ayurveda*, *Sidha*, *Unani*, and *Tibetan*). In the past, turmeric as well as its wild relatives such as *C aromatica* (*Vanaharidra*— Jungle turmeric), was used to dye clothes (cotton, silk, and wool), though the color degrades rapidly in presence of sunlight. In modern times, the coloring matter of turmeric (curcumin) is used as a safe food color in cheese, spices, mustard,

cereal products, pickles, potato flakes, soups, ice creams, yogurt, etc. The medicinal uses of turmeric and curcumin are indeed diverse, ranging from cosmetic face cream to the prevention of Alzheimer's disease. Turmeric is also qualified as the queen of natural Cox-2 inhibitors (Duke, 2003). Recent researches on turmeric are focused on its antioxidant, hepatoprotective, anti-inflammatory, anticarcinogenic, and antimicrobial properties, in addition to its use in cardiovascular and gastrointestinal disorders.

PROPERTIES OF TURMERIC

According to Ayurveda, turmeric has the following properties:

Rasa (taste)—Thikta (Bitter) and Katu (pungent)

Guna (property) — Rooksha (irritant, to make dry, rough)

Veerya (potency) — Ushna (hot)

Vipaka (metabolic property) — Katu (pungent)

Turmeric is bitter in taste and its action is “pungent-like” after digestion and metabolism. Being hot, light, acrid, and irritant, it is able to reduce corpulence; stimulate all functions, and clear channels. Bhavamisra (an Ayurvedic scholar, the author of the ancient lexicon Bhavaprakasa Nighantu) denotes turmeric as a curing agent for Kapha (phlegmatic disorders) and Pitta (digestive, metabolic, and related diseases). It is very good for skin afflictions and acts as an enhancer of complexion. It is effective in all types of skin diseases, diabetes, bleeding, and other blood-related diseases, inflammations, anemia, and abscess. In Rajanighantu (another ancient lexicon by Narahari), Haridra (turmeric) is stated to be an effective remedy for rheumatoid arthritis and itching, in addition to the above. Nighanturatnakara (yet another ancient lexicon of Ayurveda) points out more actions such as anthelmintic property, antipoisonous effects, and curative property in catarrhal affections, anorexia (absence of appetite), and enlargement of neck glands. Indications for the use of turmeric as a specific single drug are available in Charaka samhita, Susruta samhita, Ashtanga sangraha, and the lexicons of Chakradatta and Vangasena (all of which are ancient treatises of Ayurveda), for diabetes, leprosy, extreme thirst, elephantiasis, and calculus.

The use of turmeric in India generally comes under different headings as shown below:

- As a spice
- As an auspicious substance in Indian religious rituals
- As a dye
- As a cosmetic
- As a medicine
- In tribal medicine
- In Ayurvedic medicine
- As a home remedy (folk medicine)
- In other traditional systems

Investigations on its unlimited uses are going on even now, although the saga of turmeric started probably about 4000 yr ago.

INDICATIONS

Turmeric has got a wide range of activities, properties, and uses as per the ancient traditional medicine texts, some of which are as aromatic, stimulant, tonic, carminative, and anthelmintic. It is effective in treating liver obstruction and dropsy, is externally used for ulcers and inflammation, cures flatulence, dyspepsia, anorexia, intermittent fevers, prurigo, eczema, sprain, bruises, wounds, inflammatory troubles of joints, small pox, chicken pox, catarrhal and purulent ophthalmia, conjunctivitis, cough, ring worm and other parasitic skin diseases, piles, common cold, catarrh, coryza, hysterical fits, relieves pain in scorpion sting, chronic otorrhoea, reduces indolent swellings, and is used in the treatment of urinary diseases, leucoderma, diseases of blood, bad taste in mouth, elephantiasis, diarrhoea, bronchitis, vertigo, and gonorrhoea, (Nadkarni 1976; Kritikar and Basu 1984). It is intellect-promoting (Sayana), antidote for snake venom (Kausika Sutra), in cardiac complaints and jaundice (Atharva veda samhita).

Turmeric is indicated against a variety of health problems and pathological conditions and used traditionally by a large number of ethnic communities in a variety of conditions. Some of the properties are well documented and validated by pharmacological and clinical trials, while many remain to be validated (Duke, 2003). Jager (1997) compiled 114 biological properties of turmeric from the USDA database.

Abscess, Adenoma, Adenosis, Allergy, Alzheimer's, Amenorrhoea, Anorexia, Arthrosis, Asthma, Atherosclerosis, Athlete's foot, Bacillus, Bacteria, Bite, Bleeding, Boil, Bowen's disease, Bronchitis, Bruise, Bursitis, Cancer, Cancer – abdomen, Cancer – bladder, Cancer – breast, Cancer – cervix, Cancer – colon, Cancer – duodenum, Cancer – esophagus, Cancer – joint, Cancer – liver, Cancer – mouth, Cancer – skin, Cancer – stomach, Cancer – uterus, Cardiopathy, Cataract, Catarrh, Chest ache, Childbirth, Cholecystosis, Circulosis, Cold, Colic, Coma, Congestion, Conjunctivitis, Constipation, Coryza, Cramp, Cystosis, Dermatitis, Diabetes, Diarrhea, Dropsy, Duodenitis, Dysgeusia, Dysmenorrhoea, Dyspepsia, Dysuria, Eczema, Edema, Elephantiasis, Enteritis, Epilepsy, Epistaxis, Esophagitis, Fever, Fibrosis, Fungus, Gallstone, Gastritis, Gonorrhoea, Gray hair, Headache, Hematemesis, Hematuria, Hemorrhoid, Hepatitis, High blood pressure, High cholesterol, High triglycerides, Hyperlipidemia, Hysteria, Immunodepression, Infection, Inflammation, Itch, Jaundice, Laryngitis, Leprosy, Leukemia, Leishmania, Leukoderma, Leukoplakia, Lymphoma, Malaria, Mania, Morning sickness, Mucositis, Mycosis, Nematode, Nephrosis, Nervousness, Ophthalmia, Osteoarthritis, Ozena, Pain, Parasite, Polyp, Psoriasis, Puerperium, Radiation injury, Restenosis, Rheumatism, Rhinitis, Ring worm, Scabies, Small pox, Sore, Sore throat, Sprain, Stone, Staphylococcus, Stroke, Swelling, Syphilis, Trauma, Ulcer, Uveitis, Vertigo, Vomiting, Wart, Water retention, Whitlow, Worm, Wound, Yeast (Duke 2003).

Other uses of turmeric in traditional system are:

1. It is an essential substance to purify the gum resin of *Commiphora mukul* (Guggul) before it is made use of in Ayurvedic formulations.
2. Turmeric powder is mixed with the latex of *Snuhi* (*Euphorbia nerifolia*) plant and is then coated over the surgical thread repeatedly. This thread is known as *Ksharasoothra*, which is tied on piles and fistula to cure them effectively.
3. In veterinary medicine, turmeric is used to heal wounds or ulcers of animals.
4. In “leech therapy,” turmeric powder is sprinkled over the leech to detach it from the biting site. Again turmeric powder is added to the water, in which the leech is kept, to make it vomit the sucked blood.
5. Turmeric powder is used as an insect and ant repellent and sprinkled around the vessels to be protected.
6. Turmeric is included in the group of yellow substances (*Peetha varga*) in *Rasa sastra* (Alchemy), used in the processing of Mercury.

HEALING PROPERTY, SKIN CARE

According to Ayurveda, turmeric is *Vranahara* (ulcer healing), *Varnya* (improve complexion), *Tvakdoshahara* (cure skin diseases), and *Kandoohara* (cure itching). Till recently, before the onslaught of synthetic and herbal skin care products in the market, womenfolk were dependent more on turmeric, and they used to smear their bodies with a mixture of turmeric–sandal paste for gaining a golden glow to their skin, (Remadevi and Ravindran, 2005). Turmeric helps to remove hairs and impart colour and improve complexion of skin. Several Sanskrit synonyms of turmeric indicate its color-improving property (such as: *varna-datri* — one who gives color, indicates its use as enhancer of body complexion; *hemaragi* and *hemaragini* — both indicate golden color, meaning that it is used by womenfolk to get a golden complexion; *yoshti priya*, meaning favourite of young women, indicating its use for enhancing beauty; *hridayavilasini*, meaning giving delight to heart, charming; etc.). It is considered as an effective wound-healing medicine and is strongly related to the social customs of India. If a wound occurs as a part of a ritual, only turmeric powder is used for healing. The wounds are usually caused by old, rusty, unclean iron sword or hooks while performing certain rituals; even in such cases the wounds get healed without any pus formation or infection.

The fresh juice of turmeric is believed to have antiparasitic property in many skin afflictions.

Turmeric mixed with gingelly oil is applied over the body to prevent skin eruptions. A coating of turmeric powder or a thin paste is applied on small pox and chicken pox patients to facilitate the process of scabbing (Nadkarni, 1976).

Haridrakhanda, a traditional confectionary preparation described in *Bhaishjya ratnavali*, is very effective in prurigo, boils, urticaria, and chronic skin eruptions.

Oil of turmeric and its ether and chloroform extracts have proved to be antifungal, antiprotozoan, antiviral, and antibacterial (Chattopadhyaya et al., 2004).

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