

# Mexican Traditional Medicine: A Primer

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**Abstract:** In order to meet his basic needs, man has always had a close relationship with traditional herbs. Traditional medicine is recognized and promoted by the World Health Organization as an important healthcare resource. Traditional medicine has long been popular in Mexico. With the increase of healthcare costs in the US, many people are seeking alternative means to treat themselves. With traditional medicine, there is no need for an appointment and no need to travel great distances from rural to urban centers. For these reasons, there is a rising movement to restore ancient herbal healing practices. This paper provides a primer on Mexican traditional medicine.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Medicine, Mexican Traditional Medicine*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that modern medicine is desperately short of new treatments. It takes years for a new drug to be developed, go through rigorous laboratory tests, get approved, and become commercialized. Today, many scientists have started to search indigenous sources for new drugs.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called for the protection of traditional knowledge, the integration of alternative medicine in national health systems, and the certification of those who practice traditional healing. Traditional medicine is practiced in rural communities in Mexico where modern healthcare is limited or difficult to access. The traditional medical services improve the quality of life of the patients through both physical and emotional care. The efficacy of the herbal medicines that Mexicans bring from Mexico to the United States is well documented.



Figure 1: Festivals and fiestas are extremely important in Mexico [2].

People of Latin-American descent, now more commonly called Latinos, are among the fastest growing ethnic segments of the US population. Latinos constitute almost 13% of the US population. Although Mexican-Americans were initially living in southwestern states, they now live throughout the entire nation. Like other immigrant groups, the Mexican cherishes their family recipes and embraces their culture through food, fiestas, and family life [1]. As typically shown in Figure 1, festivals and fiestas are extremely important in Mexico and celebrated even in the villages [2]. The Mexican culture is rich

with traditions that are well documented to have existed long before Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The earliest Mexican settlers in Chicago expressed distrust of doctors and the medicines they offered.

Traditional medicines are very important in Mexico. The quality of healthcare in Mesoamerica is influenced by its rich cultural diversity and characterized by social inequalities. The traditional medicine from ancient Mesoamerica by way of Mexico can teach us today about well-being and healing in mind, body, spirit, and emotions. It is one of the many types of alternative or folk medicine practitioners among the Hispanic community. Figure 2 shows the map of Mesoamerica [3]. Traditional Mexican healing practices have survived conquest, colonization, and modern medicine because many modalities require little if any equipment. Mexico is regarded for its cultural and biological diversity, which is reflected in the vast traditional knowledge of herbal remedies.



Figure 2: Map of Mesoamerica [3].

## II. CONCEPT OF MEXICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The traditions and customs of the Mexican people are diverse. They are proud of their native heritage and each region has its own cultural practices and celebrations. There are several indigenous groups within Mexico and have all influenced the Mexican culture in terms of cuisine, medicine, rituals, and language. These indigenous peoples believe disease exists not only in the people's body but also in their spirit. The Mexican traditional medicine (MTM) approaches tend to be more preventative and lifestyle-oriented than allopathic approaches. Mexicans have a lot of faith in the traditional remedies.

Folk medicine (or curanderismo or "medicine of the people") is an alternate system of healthcare that is still widely practiced throughout the US. It is the mixture of traditional healing practices that involve herbal medicine, spirituality, and manual therapies in order to diagnose, treat or prevent illness, and prescribe remedy. Folk remedies are still used to treat illness every day. The healing may consist of rituals, herbal remedies, potions or counter-magic, depending upon the illness being treated. Healing often occurs in a ceremony called

a barrida (the “sweeping”) where eggs, lemons and various herbs, along with prayer, are often used.

Mexican traditional healers (or folk healers, or curanderos) believe that their healing abilities are a spiritual vocation. The healers understand the connection between good sanitation and good health. They use herbs and other plants, incense, and chanting in order to cure illness and travel to spiritual dimensions. Healers of Mexico's indigenous communities want to preserve traditional knowledge and skills on medicinal plants. They intend to pass along herbal healing traditions handed down through the generations. Many healers also offer spiritual counseling services and cleansing rituals. A traditional healer is shown in Figure 3 [4].



Figure 3: A certified traditional healer [4].

### III. MEXICAN HERBS



Figure 4: Mexican herbs on display [5].

Mexico has numerous indigenous herbs that can be used for healing. Studies on herbs from Mexican plants used in traditional medicine have evidenced a great potential for their use as preservatives, antioxidant sources, and functional agents. Many of the herbs are widely available, relatively inexpensive, and effective. They are readily available in marketplaces in Mexico. Herbal teas come in a variety of delicious flavors and they offer health-promoting results. They are therapeutic products and foods made from the leaves, seeds, flowers, and roots of plants, or their extracts. Figure 4 shows some Mexican herbs on display [5]. “The most widely used are about 50 herbs and there are more than 3,000 species of plants in daily use. Some popular herbs advised for certain conditions are the following [6,7]:

- *Chamomile/manzanilla* is one of the most common natural aids for anxiety, mild depression, and high blood pressure. Chamomile tea has soothing, calming, and relaxing properties.
- *Hierbabuena* (mint tea) relieves digestive symptoms, such as gas, bloating, and indigestion.
- *Limes/limones* is used as a diuretic, for sore throats, coughs, and colds. Mexicans put limes on practically everything!
- *Ruda* can help relieve headache or stomach cramps. It also may be used to help with fainting spells and is also used to get rid of piojos (head lice).
- *Zarzamora* is for control of diarrhea and is said to help with general health of the gums.
- *Damiana* helps digestion as well as being an aphrodisiac.
- *Sábila* is a plant with milky, sticky substance that, when applied directly to the affected area, can do wonders for burns. It is said to aid in digestion and can combat infection.
- *Calendula* is a centuries-old antifungal, antiseptic, wound-healing ally.
- *Cilantro* boasts a unique flavor and is a powerful digestive aid that is capable of removing heavy metals and other toxic agents from the body.
- *Lemon balm* has a relaxing, antispasmodic effect on the stomach and nervous system. It may help fight off viruses.
- *Peppermint* is a familiar flavor in toothpaste and chewing gum. When brewed as tea, peppermint may relieve digestive discomforts such as indigestion and vomiting.
- *Rosemary* is a perennial woody herb that stimulates energy and sharpens memory and concentration by bringing more oxygen to the brain.
- *Lavender* is a woody plant that boasts medical benefits as a mild antidepressant. One can add lavender oil to bath to alleviate stress, tension, and insomnia.
- *Cinnamon* has numerous health benefits, and is particularly effective at lowering blood sugar levels. It has potent antioxidant activity, helps fight inflammation, and has been shown to lower cholesterol in the blood.
- *Sage* extract can improve brain and memory function, especially in individuals with Alzheimer’s disease.
- *Holy basil* appears to improve immune function and inhibit the growth of bacteria, yeasts and molds.
- *Cayenne pepper* is a type of chili pepper used to prepare spicy dishes. It has also shown anti-cancer potential in animal studies.
- *Ginger* is an effective treatment for many types of nausea. It is also anti-inflammatory property and can help reduce pain.
- *Fenugreek* can improve the function of insulin, leading to significant reductions in blood sugar levels.
- *Rosemary* has anti-inflammatory effects that appear to suppress allergy symptoms and reduce nasal congestion.
- *Osha* is considered an immune booster and aid for coughs, pneumonia, colds, bronchitis, and the flu.
- *Dill* is a herb that has been shown to have antioxidant, antiprotozoal, antibacterial, and anticancer properties.
- *Aloe* is known for its effectiveness at cooling and soothing sunburn.

Some of these herbs are easy to grow and they bring health benefits to families. They are so ingrained in Mexican culture that they are still used in some parts of Mexico today.

#### IV. APPLICATIONS OF MEXICAN TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The cost of modern medicine is skyrocketing. People face difficulties accessing quality care due to their race or gender and are eager for options outside of the mainstream medical system. Some families who cannot afford modern medicine are turning to more traditional, natural remedies. Today, Mexican indigenous medicinal plants are being used to treat many diseases.

- *Fever*: Many regard fever as a disease in and of itself and not as a symptom of a much broader process like infection. The presence of a fever in a young child may be considered by the mother as an emergency situation. Fever is the symptom about which the mother will be most concerned and worrisome [1].
- *Cancer*: Cancer cases are increasing in number worldwide. Medicinal plants have been used in the fight against cancer and today more than 70% of anticancer drugs have a natural origin [8].
- *Diabetes*: This is the most common chronic disease characterized by an increase in glucose levels due to insulin deficiency. The disease is associated with eye, renal, cardiovascular, neurological complications, fatigue, weight loss, delayed wound healing, blurred vision, increases in urine glucose levels, etc. In the absence of proper treatment, cardiac, vascular, neurological, and renal damage may occur. Treatment includes diet, exercise, and medication. Plenty of plants have been investigated for anti-diabetic effects. They can reduce diabetes complications [9].
- *Coronavirus*: Mexican herbalists have gained confidence and good reputations and increased sales of their plants for treatments of respiratory diseases in times of the new coronavirus pandemic. Composed of green tea leaves, chamomile, dandelion, and antiviral make up interferon that help strengthen the immune system [10].
- *Depression and Anxiety*: These are psychiatric disorders, which share similar symptoms. Anxiety is often regarded as a normal reaction to a stressor. Anxiety disorders affect 18% of the general US adult population. People with anxiety disorders often face numerous challenges to take therapy such as a lack of healthcare services. The use of herbal medicine is widespread among those who suffer mood and anxiety disorders. In Mexico, 92 plant species can be used in folk medicine for the treatment of depression and anxiety. For example, chamomile may be clinically relevant due to its antidepressant activity [11].

#### V. BENEFITS

Mexico's healthcare system has not been able to meet the needs of its population due to the growing challenges created by the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and cancer. People living in rural communities of Mexico have little access to modern healthcare facilities and most of them use traditional medicine. This is due to the fact that traditional herbal remedies are inexpensive, natural, and safe.

To supplement the modern healthcare system, there is a growing interest in traditional medicine both in Mexico and the United States. Traditional or indigenous medicine can bridge some of these barriers to health care. The National Autonomous University of Mexico has set up a digital library that lists more than 3,000 indigenous plant species. California School of Herbal Studies was founded in 1978 for herbal education. The Tzu Chi medical team (TIMA) provides a wide range of compassionate healthcare from both Western and alternative medical practices and dental services in Mexico [12].

There are stores still selling a great variety of herbs in Chicago, Los Angeles, Amarillo, Oakland, etc. For example, Herbs of Mexico, a shop that was opened in 1961 in Los Angeles, carries herbs that are traditional in Mexican healing practices. It has been registered with the Food and Drug Administration. It does not source herbs whose harvesting is harmful to the environment [5].

#### VI. CHALLENGES

Mexican traditional medicine faces some challenges that stem from the renewed interest in herbal medicine. Popular herbs are now readily available at supermarkets, chain health food stores, and fly-by-night sellers, competing with local Mexican herb stores. There is also the problem of overdose rates in MTM. While most folk remedies are harmless, some remedies could be potentially fatal. Herbs are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Some are of the opinion that regulating indigenous medicine in Mexico could violate rights.

Concerns have been raised about the quality and safety of traditional medicine. There is little legal protection. There is the need of adequate legislation at the state and federal levels to prevent biopiracy and grant recognition to this ancestral wisdom. But traditional medical groups warn against legislation to grant state authority to regulate and control the practice of indigenous medicine. The Mexican state authority also sees the legislation as violating the country's constitution and international conventions on the rights of ancestral communities, academics, and traditional medical groups. It violates the right of self-determination of indigenous communities to preserve their knowledge and cultural identity [13]. Increased scrutiny and a growing atmosphere of tension and discrimination could deter even documented Latino immigrants from seeking proper care. More studies are needed in order to gather information regarding the use of various herbs in México.

#### CONCLUSION

The traditional medicine industry is worth big money and is rapidly growing. Indigenous people worldwide still reckon with the natural world and safeguard the plant spirits. Many Mexican Americans still practice traditional Mexican medicine due to access to healthcare, cost, and family tradition. For much of humankind, possessing plant knowledge, or being accessible to a person who does, can make the difference between life and death. Regarding MTM as a whole medical practices could help improve health outcomes for Latino patients.

There is a trend to use medicinal plants for primary medical care or as dietary supplements. Scientists are beginning to uncover the efficacy of traditional medicine. It is inevitable that ancient and modern medicines are converging. Integrating traditional medicine into modern system has been taken seriously by some of the biggest research bodies worldwide. Incorporating MTM practices into modern medicine will allow

more effective and culturally sensitive healthcare provision for Latino immigrants in the United States. More information about Mexican traditional medicine can be found in the books in [14-20] and the following related journals:

- *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*
- *Journal of Medicinal Plants Research*

#### DISCLAIMER

The information in this paper is for enlightenment purposes only and should not be used as a replacement for professional diagnosis and treatments. Always consult your healthcare provider before making any health-related decisions.

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