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Honey and maggots help healing and 'fight' infection

You could be forgiven for thinking you were in an episode of Springwatch, but a visit to the RUH could see the best in insect therapy being used in the wound healing process.

Nurses are using natural healing products such as honey and maggot larvae to clean wounds and help in the fight against MRSA.

When skin becomes damaged the remaining wound takes time to heal. Whilst many heal naturally in time, choosing the right dressing for each wound can make all the difference to ensure patients have the best chance of healing as quickly, and as pain free, as possible.

Medical grade Manuka honey, harvested from the native New Zealand Manuka plant, has antibacterial properties not found in other honeys and is now being used in a range of wound dressings at the RUH.

Kate Purser, Tissue Viability Nurse Specialist says: "Honey has been used in healing for centuries but now new products on the market have overcome the problems associated with using conventional honey and bring the use of honey into a modern healthcare setting. As well as having effective antibacterial properties, honey has an osmotic action meaning its high sugar content actively draws fluid from the wound helping the body to dissolve and remove dead tissue. It also reduces wound odour and maintains a moist wound healing environment."

Mrs Dorothy Yeo, from Bath, has been receiving treatment for an ulcer for the last three year and recently began using honey dressings. She says: "I felt I wasn't getting anywhere, and the pain made it hard to sleep. But now after trying the honey dressings I'm optimistic about the future, I'm able to sleep without sleeping tablets and for the first time new skin is forming over my ulcer. There is a bit of pain when the dressing is first in place but there would be pain with any dressing and it soon settles down. I'm very, very pleased, these dressings just seem to work for me and I'd recommend the treatment to anyone; it really has made a great difference to me."

From bees to the sterilised larvae of the common greenbottle fly, the use of maggot therapy in wound healing can help in the ongoing fight against MRSA and other healthcare associated infections.

Kate says "Sterile maggots applied to a wound as part of a dressing, are capable of killing bacteria in their gut, including MRSA; in addition, their saliva contains enzymes that enable them to remove dead or unhealthy tissue and promote healing in a wound".

Used for hundreds of years, maggots fell out of favour in the 1940s after the introduction of antibiotics. Maggot therapy was reintroduced to the UK in 1995 and was accepted for use by the NHS in 2004.

Kate adds “We may use maggot therapy when conventional dressings have not been successful or if a wound requires a more rapid form of treatment. The maggots can convert an infected, offensive smelling wound into a clean healthy wound within a few days.”

“There is something of the ‘yuck’ factor which may put people off but once the maggots are applied, some people may feel a tickling sensation, but most people don’t feel a thing.”

Mr Jack Foster, 87, from Keysham is currently receiving maggot therapy treatment at the RUH for a leg ulcer that developed two months ago. He says: “When they told me that they wanted to treat my leg with maggots I thought, well, I never heard of such a thing in all my life! I immediately thought of the maggots that fishermen use until someone explained that the maggots were bred for this purpose only and I felt reassured. After one treatment, there has already been some improvement and my second treatment starts tomorrow.”

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