



**Honey.** Some people think it's the nectar of the gods and it's got a pretty good reputation for its medical qualities too.

But is that reputation deserved?

**Our reporter Michael Slater** is in New Zealand to find out whether honey really is the nectar of the gods when it comes to healing powers.

Honey has been used for at least 5000 years for its healing properties. Ancient Greece's Hippocrates, the father of medicine, found honey cleans sores and ulcers on the lips. He also found it heals boils and running sores.

But the sticky stuff got nudged aside by modern medicine. Now it's making a comeback. At the University Of Waikato, in New Zealand, Professor Peter Molan reckons honey is the bee's knees and is as close as you'll get to a medical magic bullet — but not just any old honey.

"When it comes to serious infections, Manuka honey is particularly valuable because it has a much better anti-bacterial activity than other honey. When I cut my finger with a chainsaw quite deeply, quite a wide cut, I just put honey straight on it, wrapped it up and kept on working for the rest of the day — there's not a mark on it," he says.

No wonder he thinks it's magic! But Peter's not on his own.

Gary Bain from Sydney Adventist Hospital's wound clinic is a big fan of Manuka honey too. And for his patient, Geoff Pearce, it meant the saving of his leg.

"It was a work accident. I cut myself on some tin plate and what started out as a small scratch turned into a horrible ulcer," says Geoff.

Geoff's had to have his wound treated twice a week, for six years. The honey-impregnated dressings have kept it free of infection, they've also reduced inflammation, allowing the wound to heal. All thanks to Manuka honey.

"It can be a cream or it can come impregnated into other dressing materials. The honey that we've used for Geoff is impregnated into a seaweed layer and that gives us longer

duration of action. It also gives us more absorbency and it's one good way of making sure the honey stays in contact with the wound's surface," says Gary.

Sceptical? Michael needs some convincing it's the honey that's really making the difference.

Michael: "Can we put it to the test? Can you prove it to me?"

Professor Molan: "I'll just go and get my lab coat and I'll show you."

First the professor puts some golden staph bacteria in an agar to grow in the dishes. Then he cuts holes to hold a dab of ordinary antiseptic cream and the Manuka honey.

No surprises which one Peter reckons will stop the bugs in their tracks!

"The honey will diffuse out into the agar and stop the bacteria growing around it and the stronger the activity, the further out it will stop them growing."

Michael's not so sure, but into the incubator it goes and we'll soon be able to see if the professor's Manuka honey is all it's cracked up to be.

Results

Does honey have healing benefits? We've incubated some golden staph bacteria, to see if Manuka honey packs the same punch as an over-the-counter anti-bacterial cream.

Both the honey and antiseptic cream have worked, but the honey has knocked the staph for six.

The cream maybe managed a four.

Michael: "Well there's the proof. The anti-bacterial cream, I expected that to work, and to a degree, the honey, but that has worked better than the antiseptic cream ... I walked out thinking this was a bit of baloney. Here is absolute proof — so honey is a great healer."

Okay, so it's got Michael convinced. But what's so special about the Manuka variety? The Manuka bush. Bill Bennet, one of a just handful of New Zealand's registered suppliers of Manuka honey. No one really knows exactly why the Manuka blossom makes good medicine.

Or if they do, they're not telling us!

Michael: "So Bill, does this grow in Australia?"

Bill: "I hope not!"

No Kiwi's ever going to give away a trade secret! In fact, Manuka is so special, beekeepers move the beehives close to the best blossoms. Some blossoms produce stronger anti-bacterial honey. That's why Manuka honey has its own effectiveness rating, the Unique Manuka Factor or UMF. The higher the number, the better it fights bacteria. Because Manuka only flowers between December and January, there's just six weeks to make a year's supply. Trickier still, not all Manuka bushes produce the medicinal honey. "Just only a small percentage of Manuka honey has the special UMF property and that's the one that is so good for healing," says Bill.

Fortunately, there are other honeys that get the job done. At the Princes Alexandra Hospital in Queensland, Dr David Mudge uses Medi-honey. It's a real honey, like Manuka, but it kills bacteria by releasing hydrogen peroxide.

"We're using a medical preparation of honey for prevention of infections related to dialysis catheters. We apply it to the catheter where it's coming out from the skin, and then we put an occlusive dressing over the top of that and that means for the couple of days when the honey is on there, that it reduces the chance of the catheter getting infected," says Dr Mudge.

And the natural honey product has one big advantage over antibiotics.

"Antibiotic use has been associated increasingly with resistance to the antibiotics by superbugs and other germs in the hospital situation, but honey doesn't have that problem and it's never been reported for any bacteria to be resistant to the honey," says Dr Mudge. As we've heard, not all honey can do this, so it's not just a matter of grabbing some out of your cupboard. For an open wound, Manuka's the go. Choose your UMF strength and let the healing begin.

#### Conclusion

So honey really does cut it when it comes to its healing powers. You can slap some honey on your infections or spray it down your throat or spread it on your toast. Honey is a healthy healing option.

#### Fast facts

Honey is 25 percent sweeter than ordinary table sugar. But does that mean it's not as healthy to eat? No, it's healthier. Both sugar and honey contain the sweeteners glucose and fructose. But in sugar those two are joined together while in honey they're not. So it takes longer to digest and provides slightly more sustained energy.

Another plus for honey is that it contains antioxidants that are good for your heart.