

Why Witch Hazel Is Great for Your Skin

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Witch hazel is an extract of active plant constituents such as flavonoids, polyphenols, tannins and volatile oils taken from the North American shrub of the same name
- › These compounds make witch hazel a potent, natural astringent that boasts anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and antioxidant properties
- › Because witch hazel is useful for the treatment of a variety of skin issues – from acne and bruises to insect bites and poison ivy – it would be a great addition to your medicine cabinet
- › You can easily make your own witch hazel solution at home, which can be consumed as a tea, used as an oral rinse or gargle, or combined with other ingredients to make an air freshener, facial spritz or household cleaner

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Witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is an extract from the North American shrub of the same name. Traditionally, the bark, leaves and twigs have been used to extract active plant constituents such as flavonoids, polyphenols, tannins and volatile oil. These compounds make witch hazel a potent, natural astringent that boasts anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial and antioxidant properties.

As such, witch hazel is useful for the treatment of a variety of skin issues – from acne and bruises to insect bites and poison ivy. While you will need to read labels carefully to ensure you are purchasing a high-quality, unadulterated product, you should have no

trouble finding witch hazel. It is widely available worldwide, or, as mentioned later, you can easily make your own at home. According to The Atlantic,¹ witch hazel is rooted in U.S. history as:

- The first mass-marketed American-made toiletry best known under its second name: Pond's Extract
- One of the only medicinal plants approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as a nonprescription drug ingredient

Given its effectiveness and versatility, it's common to find witch hazel extract as an ingredient in many over-the-counter beauty products and medicines, such as acne products, aftershave, bug repellent, hemorrhoid creams, makeup removers and shampoo.² It's doctor-approved and often used in hospitals for wound care and postpartum vaginal care. But, as you'll soon discover, this is just a small sampling of witch hazel's many uses.

Health Benefits of Witch Hazel

As mentioned, witch hazel is known for its broad range of medicinal applications. While there are undoubtedly others, below are four of the top health benefits of witch hazel as noted by Livestrong:³

- **Anti-inflammatory** — When applied to bug bites, diaper rash, razor burn and other skin conditions, witch hazel exhibits powerful anti-inflammatory effects by acting on free radicals in your skin cells.

As published in J-Stage Biological and Pharmaceutical Bulletin,⁴ Japanese researchers testing 65 plant extracts for their potential anti-inflammatory applications with respect to skincare found that witch hazel was one of just two extracts that exhibited “strong active-oxygen scavenging activity and protective activity against cell damage induced by active oxygen.”

- **Antimicrobial** – Another traditional use for witch hazel is to destroy or inhibit the growth of the microorganisms associated with conditions like chicken pox, cuts and poison ivy. A 2002 German study⁵ that evaluated the antimicrobial activity of a hamamelis distillate on bacteria and fungi such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Candida albicans*, demonstrated the “significant antimicrobial activity” of witch hazel.

Furthermore, the study authors validated witch hazel’s value in preventing the bacterial colonization responsible for the development of atopic dermatitis and intertrigo dermatitis, as well as other microbial skin conditions.

- **Astringent** – Witch hazel is considered to be a potent natural astringent due to the high concentration of tannins found in its leaves.⁶ It removes excess dirt and oil from your skin, helps shrink your pores, and tightens and tones your skin. Given witch hazel’s ability to promote skin healing and stop bleeding, it is useful in the treatment of acne, eczema, hemorrhoids and varicose veins.
- **Moisturizer** – A 2007 study published in the *European Journal of Pediatrics*⁷ suggests witch hazel ointment was found to be as effective as dexpanthenol – a prescription drug used as a moisturizer to improve elasticity, hydration and softness in the outer layer of skin with respect to conditions such as diaper rash and skin burns from radiation therapy – in children up to age 11.

Why You’ll Want to Keep a Bottle on Hand

Though commercial marketing of witch hazel previously focused primarily on its use for skin conditions, such as addressing broken skin or cleansing pores, an increasing number of other uses for this versatile herb continue to be uncovered. While most of the following uses are anecdotal and have yet to be scientifically validated, they provide ample evidence to support the addition of witch hazel to your medicine cabinet. Below are 26 ways you can use witch hazel:^{8,9,10,11}

Boosts your immune system — Given its antibacterial and antiseptic properties, witch hazel, when applied topically, is believed to stimulate your immune system to destroy and inhibit pathogenic invaders in your body. In addition, some suggest drinking witch hazel tea can boost your overall health.

Brightens around your eyes — Because witch hazel tightens skin and reduces inflammation, it is an ideal remedy for treating discoloration and puffiness under and around your eyes. Use a cotton ball to dab it on. Avoid getting witch hazel in your eyes because the burning and drying effects may be intense.

Calms bug bites and stings — Due to its anti-inflammatory and astringent properties, witch hazel calms bug bites and stings, giving you a good reason to bring some along the next time you spend a day outdoors.

Cleanses your scalp — If you suffer from dandruff or another irritating skin condition, you may want to use witch hazel in your hair-cleansing routine. Massage witch hazel into your scalp and follow up with shampoo and conditioner as desired. Witch hazel can also be applied in between shampoos to calm scalp irritation.

Clears acne — The natural astringent properties of witch hazel can help you clear acne by diminishing redness, reducing inflammation and removing bacteria and oil. It has also been shown to speed the healing of acne-related infection, scabs and scars, while curbing the development of blackheads and whiteheads when used regularly.

Cools sunburn — You can make your own anti-inflammatory sunburn remedy with cooling properties by combining witch hazel and aloe vera. Continuing to apply witch hazel for several days after a sunburn will help prevent dryness and peeling.

Dries swimmer's ear — Treat the microbial infection of your ear canal commonly known as swimmer's ear by placing several drops of witch hazel into each ear. Its strong antimicrobial properties will break up wax, clear oil and dry pus.

Eliminates headaches — You can eliminate headaches by applying witch hazel topically to your temples to reduce tension in the small capillaries often known to cause headaches. Drinking witch hazel tea is believed to reduce your blood pressure and relax throbbing areas.

Eases digestion — You might consider mixing a small amount of witch hazel tea with chamomile or mint tea for use as a general stomach tonic to promote digestion and reduce inflammation. This mixture is believed to soothe the symptoms of diarrhea, dysentery and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Fades bruises — Apply witch hazel with a cotton ball to help fade the discoloration of bruises and speed the healing process for underlying damage.

Fights the signs of aging — Witch hazel has been shown to fight premature aging, including discoloration, dryness, loss of elasticity and redness. Given its antioxidant properties, witch hazel also offers protection against melanoma, thanks to its polyphenols and tannins that are known to inhibit the proliferation of melanoma cells.¹²

Goes hand in hand with hair removal — If you routinely shave any part of your body, you'll be happy to know witch hazel not only can help soothe razor burn, but also can stop nicks and cuts from bleeding. Given its anti-inflammatory properties, another option is to apply witch hazel after hot wax treatments.

Heals your respiratory tract — When taken as a tea or gargled, there is evidence witch hazel calms irritated respiratory passages with respect to coughing, inflammation of the vocal chords and sore throats. Drinking witch hazel tea promotes hydration — effectively reducing mucus and preventing it from hardening and blocking your sinuses.

Neutralizes contact dermatitis — Due to its anti-itch and drying effects, you may find witch hazel useful in neutralizing the effects of urushiol, the skin-irritating compound

found in poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac that causes contact dermatitis in most people who come in contact with those plants.

Pacifies hemorrhoids – After skin care, the use of witch hazel as an astringent and anti-inflammatory for the treatment of hemorrhoids may be its most popular application, so much so that it is a common ingredient found in most over-the-counter hemorrhoid creams.

Due to its potency, however, be careful when applying witch hazel to inflamed hemorrhoidal tissues. Consider blending it with aloe vera. If you are taking a blood-clotting medication, consult with your doctor prior to using it.

Promotes healthy skin – As mentioned, witch hazel is best known for its positive effects on your skin. A few of the conditions for which you may find witch hazel helpful include: acne, boils, cracked skin, eczema, hives, insect bites, psoriasis and rashes. In most cases, it is beneficial to dilute witch hazel slightly using water or a carrier oil like coconut oil or olive oil.

Provides natural cleaning power – By combining witch hazel with baking soda and lemon juice, you can create a safe, nontoxic household cleaning agent. You can also use undiluted witch hazel to make chrome, glass and mirrors sparkle. Another option is to add 1/2 cup witch hazel, 1 cup of water and about 15 drops of essential oil – such as cedar, eucalyptus, grapefruit or lavender – to a spray bottle and use it as an air freshener.

Regulates menstruation – While you'll want to check with your gynecologist before adding witch hazel to your women's health routine, women suffering from heavy periods may find the application of witch hazel slows bleeding and reduces pain and inflammation in your groin. Some report it also soothes bloating and cramps.

Relieves diaper rash – The anti-inflammatory and astringent properties of witch hazel combine to provide safe and effective relief for diaper rash. When used regularly, it

can assist in healing rash-damaged skin, which will further enhance your baby's comfort.

Removes makeup — The fact witch hazel is an ingredient in most store-bought makeup removers suggests it's effective to remove both oil- and water-based makeup. You can easily create your own product by adding 3 tablespoons alcohol-free witch hazel and 2 tablespoons of olive oil to a small bottle.¹³ Shake before use and apply using a cotton square.

Shrinks swollen veins — You can soak a soft cloth in witch hazel and apply it to varicose veins to temporarily reduce pain and swelling. You may want to elevate your feet while undertaking this treatment.

Soothes aches and pains — When used topically, witch hazel can tone down inflammation associated with not only arthritis but also sore muscles and joints caused by aging, exercise or injury. Before applying it, you may want to dilute witch hazel slightly using water or a carrier oil such as coconut oil or olive oil.

Speeds healing — Witch hazel has been used for thousands of years to treat and speed wound healing for abrasions, **bruises**, cuts and other wounds, including postpartum issues such as a sore perineum and hemorrhoids.¹⁴ Its astringent properties enable it to slow bleeding and help tighten your skin. That said, avoid applying it directly to open wounds due to its potency and the potential for inflammation.

Stops bleeding — Apply witch hazel to minor cuts and scrapes to stop the bleeding and continue to apply it as needed because it naturally tightens skin and promotes faster healing.

Tackles a sore throat — Because of its astringent properties, drinking homemade witch hazel tea may help ease the pain and discomfort of a sore throat. In addition, you can gargle with it to expel excess mucus, reduce swelling and soothe the pain caused by laryngitis, sinusitis and other throat issues.

Treats damaged gums – A homemade mouth rinse made from witch hazel tea can help reduce gum bleeding, infections, irritation, pain and swelling. A great teething remedy for infants is to blend 1 teaspoon of witch hazel tea with one drop each of clove and myrrh essential oil. Apply sparingly, as needed, to your baby's gums. Use the same treatment to ease inflammation and pain after oral surgery or when dealing with erupting wisdom teeth.

How to Make Your Own Witch Hazel

In the interest of helping you avoid adulterated witch hazel products, DIY Natural¹⁵ provides helpful instructions on how to make and use your own witch hazel at home. Once you prepare the tonic, you can use it as an ingredient in other preparations, such as an astringent spritzer for your face and skin. Following are DIY's recipes for witch hazel tonic and astringent spritzer.

Witch Hazel Tonic

Ingredients

- 1/2 pound witch hazel bark
- Distilled water to cover 1 to 2 inches above bark
- Vodka or pure grain alcohol (optional)

Procedure

1. Add the witch hazel and distilled water to a stockpot on the stove
2. Bring the water to a boil, then reduce the heat
3. Cover the pot and simmer for 20 minutes
4. Remove from heat and leave covered until completely cooled

5. Strain away the bark and add vodka or pure grain alcohol in the amount of half the volume of the remaining liquid – for example, if you have 18 ounces of tea, add 9 ounces of alcohol

As prepared, this tonic has a shelf life of up to two years. Store it in a cool place away from direct sunlight. If you omit the alcohol, store your tonic in the refrigerator where it will last for up to a week.

Witch Hazel Astringent Spritzer

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons witch hazel tonic (from the recipe above)
- 1 ounce filtered water
- 8 to 10 drops essential oil
- 2-ounce spritzer bottle

Procedure

1. Pour the witch hazel tonic into the spritzer bottle
2. Add the water
3. Add 1 to 2 drops of your favorite essential oil, such as lavender, or a combination of essential oils
4. Store this spritzer in a cool dark place

While there are many options for using this spritzer, one suggestion was to use it as a refreshing facial mist at bedtime after you wash your face. It can be particularly soothing on hot summer nights.

Cautions About Witch Hazel

While witch hazel is fantastically effective for a wide variety of uses, there are a few cautions you must consider:¹⁶

- **Use only a small amount** – Due to its potency, a little witch hazel goes a long way when applied topically or consumed orally. Particularly in the case of oral consumption, less is best because too much may cause dizziness, nausea or a rash
- **Dilute it with water or a carrier oil** – To reduce the likelihood of skin irritation or inflammation, you'll experience the best results by combining witch hazel with an equal amount of water or a carrier oil like coconut oil or olive oil
- **Avoid drinking or gargling with store-bought varieties** – Because most commercially available witch hazel brands contain isopropyl alcohol, you'll want to brew your own witch hazel tea if you plan to drink it or use it orally

If you've never before used witch hazel, you may be surprised at the number of its potential uses. Given its longevity as an effective herbal treatment for skin conditions and hemorrhoids, it may be time you tried one of nature's best remedies. Just be sure to stick with reputable organic brands or, better yet, make your own.

Sources and References

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