HOME

The Ancient Maori Healing Secret: How Manuka Honey Fights Bacteria, Soothes Coughs, and Supports Wound Healing

By bestfolkmedicine · 01/11/2026 · 11 min read



For centuries, the Indigenous Maori people of New Zealand relied on a remarkable native plant for traditional healing. They used its leaves, bark, and branches to address fevers, digestive complaints, skin problems, and injuries.

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Today, that same plant is behind one of the world's most expensive and scientifically studied varieties of honey.

Known as Manuka honey, this golden substance has attracted international attention for its unusual antibacterial properties, potential benefits in wound care, and traditional reputation as a natural soothing remedy.

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Some varieties sell for extraordinary prices, and certain medical-grade formulations are even used in modern wound care.

But what makes Manuka honey so different from ordinary honey?

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The answer lies in a fascinating combination of Indigenous knowledge, botanical history, and a naturally occurring compound called methylglyoxal.

Scientists have discovered that Manuka honey can inhibit certain harmful bacteria in laboratory conditions, while medical-grade honey preparations may support healing in selected types of wounds.

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And perhaps the most surprising detail is that the Maori people recognized the value of the Manuka plant long before modern scientists began investigating its chemistry.

The Ancient Maori Connection: A Healing Plant Before Modern Medicine

Long before European settlers arrived in New Zealand, Maori communities had developed extensive knowledge of native plants.

Their traditional healing system, known as rongoa Maori, incorporated medicinal plants, spiritual practices, and cultural approaches to maintaining health and well-being.

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One important plant was Manuka, scientifically called Leptospermum scoparium.

This hardy evergreen shrub produces small white or pink flowers and thrives in many parts of New Zealand.

Although it may appear unremarkable, its leaves, bark, and wood had numerous traditional applications.

Historical records describe Maori using Manuka in several ways:

- For fevers: Leaves were heated with water and hot stones, creating a traditional preparation that was consumed.
- For digestive complaints: Bark was boiled in water and the resulting liquid used for conditions such as diarrhoea and dysentery.
- For scalp problems: Ashes from the plant were traditionally applied to the scalp.
- For injuries: Strong Manuka branches were sometimes used as splints to support broken limbs.

These practices reflect generations of traditional knowledge, although they should not be interpreted as clinical proof that the preparations are safe or effective treatments today.

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What is especially interesting is that the original Maori healing traditions focused on the plant itself rather than the honey now associated with its name.

That distinction reveals a surprising chapter in the history of Manuka.

The Surprising Truth: Manuka Honey Came Much Later

Although the Manuka plant was used by Maori communities for generations, Manuka honey did not become available in its modern form until European honeybees were introduced to New Zealand.

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The European honeybee, Apis mellifera, arrived in 1839.

Once honeybees became established, they began collecting nectar from New Zealand’s native flowering plants, including Manuka.

Over time, beekeepers discovered that honey produced from Manuka flowers had unusual characteristics.

It developed a distinctive dark golden color, rich flavor, thick texture, and chemical composition.

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Interestingly, Manuka honey was not always considered a luxury product.

Its strong flavor and unusual consistency once made it less commercially desirable than milder honey varieties.

That changed dramatically when researchers began investigating its antibacterial properties.

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A product that had once attracted relatively little attention eventually became a premium international commodity.

1. Manuka Honey Has Powerful Antibacterial Properties

One of the most extensively studied characteristics of Manuka honey is its ability to inhibit certain bacteria under laboratory conditions.

Many varieties of honey possess some antibacterial activity because of their high sugar concentration, acidity, and naturally occurring compounds.

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However, Manuka honey has a particularly interesting feature.

It often contains substantial concentrations of methylglyoxal, commonly abbreviated as MGO.

MGO is formed from a precursor called dihydroxyacetone, which is naturally present in nectar from Manuka flowers.

Researchers have identified methylglyoxal as an important contributor to the honey's non-peroxide antibacterial activity.

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Laboratory studies have investigated Manuka honey against organisms such as:

- Staphylococcus aureus, a bacterium associated with skin and wound infections.
- Certain methicillin-resistant strains of Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA).

- Escherichia coli, some strains of which can cause gastrointestinal and other infections.
- Pseudomonas aeruginosa, an organism that can complicate wound healing.

These findings are particularly interesting because antibiotic resistance has become a major global healthcare concern.

However, there is an essential scientific distinction.

Demonstrating antibacterial activity in laboratory experiments does not mean that eating Manuka honey treats an infection inside the body.

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Its most established medical applications involve specially manufactured topical products rather than replacing prescribed antibiotics.

2. Manuka Honey May Help Soothe Coughs and Irritated Throats

Honey has been used as a soothing remedy for coughs and throat irritation for centuries.

Its thick consistency can temporarily coat the throat, potentially reducing irritation and the urge to cough.

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Modern research has also examined whether honey can reduce nighttime coughing during common respiratory infections.

Studies suggest that honey may modestly reduce cough frequency and severity, particularly in children older than one year.

This makes honey a potentially useful option for temporary relief from uncomplicated cough symptoms.

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But is Manuka honey better than regular honey?

The answer is not yet clear.

Although Manuka honey has distinctive antibacterial compounds, clinical research has not established that it is superior to ordinary honey for treating cough symptoms.

Its soothing effect may depend largely on properties shared by other honey varieties.

For adults, a small spoonful of honey or honey mixed into a warm, non-scalding drink may provide temporary throat comfort.

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Honey should never be given to babies younger than 12 months because of the risk of infant botulism.

Persistent coughing, breathing difficulties, high fever, or symptoms that are getting worse require medical assessment.

3. Medical-Grade Manuka Honey Can Support Wound Healing

Perhaps the most medically significant application of Manuka honey involves wound care.

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Researchers have studied how specially prepared honey dressings interact with damaged skin and wound tissue.

Medical-grade honey products are manufactured under controlled conditions and sterilized to reduce the risk of contamination.

These products may help maintain a moist wound environment, support the removal of damaged tissue, and reduce bacterial growth in some circumstances.

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Manuka honey’s acidity, concentrated sugars, and bioactive compounds may all contribute to these effects.

A scientific review published in May 2026 examined Manuka honey in chronic and postoperative wound care.

The researchers identified promising findings involving bacterial control, wound healing, and certain specialized clinical applications.

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However, the evidence differs between wound types, and more rigorous clinical trials are needed to determine when Manuka honey performs better than conventional dressings.

Importantly, regular Manuka honey purchased from a grocery store is not equivalent to medical-grade wound honey.

Household honey should not be applied to open or infected wounds as a substitute for medical care.

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4. Manuka Honey Is Being Studied for Its Effects on Inflammation

Inflammation is a natural part of the body's immune response.

It helps protect tissues after injury and supports the early stages of healing.

However, excessive or prolonged inflammation can interfere with tissue repair.

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Researchers have investigated whether Manuka honey contains compounds capable of influencing inflammatory processes.

In experimental studies, its phenolic compounds and other constituents have demonstrated antioxidant activity.

Some research also suggests that honey-based wound preparations may help create conditions that support appropriate tissue repair.

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These effects are particularly relevant to the study of chronic wounds.

However, evidence that regularly eating Manuka honey reduces systemic inflammation or prevents chronic inflammatory diseases in humans remains insufficient.

The distinction between topical wound-care effects and whole-body health benefits is important.

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5. Why Manuka Honey Is Studied for Difficult-to-Heal Wounds

Chronic wounds can be particularly challenging because they may involve poor circulation, persistent inflammation, infection, or underlying health conditions.

Researchers have examined medical-grade honey dressings in several clinical settings, including certain diabetic foot ulcers, pressure injuries, venous leg ulcers, and postoperative wounds.

Some studies have reported encouraging improvements in wound conditions.

Laboratory research also suggests that Manuka honey may interfere with certain bacterial biofilms.

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Biofilms are organized communities of microorganisms that attach to surfaces and can make infections more difficult to manage.

This has attracted interest from researchers investigating alternatives and additions to conventional wound-care strategies.

Nevertheless, Manuka honey is not a replacement for the comprehensive treatment required for serious wounds.

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Effective care may still require antibiotics, professional cleaning, pressure relief, circulation assessment, or other medical interventions.

For people with diabetes, even a small foot wound can become serious and should be assessed promptly.

6. Can Manuka Honey Support Oral and Gum Health?

Another interesting area of research involves the bacteria found in the mouth.

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The human oral cavity contains hundreds of bacterial species, many of which are harmless or beneficial.

However, certain microorganisms contribute to dental plaque, gum inflammation, and periodontal disease.

Laboratory studies have investigated whether Manuka honey can inhibit bacteria associated with oral health problems.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(154); });
Some experimental findings suggest that its antibacterial compounds may influence the growth of particular oral microorganisms.

This has led researchers to explore potential applications in oral-care products.

However, eating Manuka honey has not been proven to prevent cavities, reverse gum disease, or replace professional dental treatment.

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Honey is rich in natural sugars, meaning frequent exposure to teeth may contribute to tooth decay.

For oral health, regular brushing, interdental cleaning, and appropriate dental care remain much more important than consuming specialized honey.

7. Does Manuka Honey Have Antioxidant Benefits?

Manuka honey contains small quantities of naturally occurring plant compounds, including phenolic acids and flavonoids.

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These substances have attracted scientific attention because of their antioxidant activity.

Antioxidants can interact with reactive molecules involved in oxidative processes.

Laboratory experiments have demonstrated antioxidant activity in different varieties of honey, including Manuka.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(157); });
However, researchers have not established that eating Manuka honey produces substantial improvements in human antioxidant status or prevents chronic diseases.

Its nutritional composition is still dominated by sugars.

Therefore, Manuka honey is best viewed as a specialty honey with interesting biological properties, not as an essential dietary supplement.

What Do MGO and UMF Ratings Mean?

Consumers shopping for Manuka honey frequently encounter labels that can be confusing.

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Two of the most recognizable measurements are MGO and UMF.

MGO indicates the concentration of methylglyoxal in the honey, usually measured in milligrams per kilogram.

For example, MGO 250+ indicates a minimum measured concentration of approximately 250 milligrams per kilogram.

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UMF, or Unique Manuka Factor, is a certification system designed to evaluate characteristics such as authenticity and chemical composition.

Higher MGO concentrations are generally associated with stronger activity in certain laboratory antibacterial tests.

However, there is no established clinical evidence that choosing the highest MGO rating provides superior cough relief or better general health.

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For ordinary dietary use, consumers do not necessarily need the most expensive product.

Is Manuka Honey Really Better Than Regular Honey?

Manuka honey has some distinctive chemical characteristics, but that does not automatically make it the best honey for every purpose.

Ordinary honey also possesses antimicrobial properties and has been studied for cough relief.

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Other medical-grade honeys have demonstrated wound-care applications.

Manuka honey is particularly interesting because of its methylglyoxal content and the research conducted on its non-peroxide antibacterial activity.

For specialized wound care, medical-grade Manuka formulations may be appropriate in selected situations.

For soothing a mild cough, ordinary honey may provide similar benefits at a much lower price.

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Ultimately, the most effective choice depends on the intended use and the quality of supporting clinical evidence.

How to Recognize Authentic Manuka Honey

As Manuka honey has become more popular, questions about product authenticity have increased.

New Zealand has established scientific criteria for identifying genuine Manuka honey intended for export.

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These criteria involve chemical markers and genetic evidence associated with the Manuka plant.

Consumers looking for authentic products should examine the stated country of origin, traceability information, independent testing, and relevant quality certifications.

An MGO rating can help describe the honey's composition, while recognized UMF certification may provide additional assurance.

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However, high ratings should not be confused with proof that the product can prevent or treat diseases.

Are There Any Risks or Side Effects?

Although honey is generally safe for most healthy adults when consumed in ordinary food quantities, several precautions matter.

People with allergies to honey or certain bee-related substances should avoid products that trigger reactions.

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Those managing diabetes or other conditions requiring careful control of carbohydrate intake should remember that Manuka honey contains substantial amounts of sugar.

Infants younger than one year must never receive honey because of the risk of infant botulism.

People with serious infections, infected wounds, or persistent respiratory symptoms should not rely on honey instead of appropriate medical evaluation.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(166); });
And essential oils or concentrated extracts derived from the Manuka plant should not be assumed to have the same safety profile as edible Manuka honey.

Final Thoughts: Ancient Maori Knowledge Meets Modern Scientific Discovery

The story of Manuka honey is much more fascinating than an expensive jar sitting on a supermarket shelf.

It begins with the Indigenous Maori people of New Zealand, whose traditional healing practices included the leaves, bark, and branches of the Manuka plant.

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Centuries later, the introduction of European honeybees made it possible to produce honey from the nectar of its delicate flowers.

Modern researchers subsequently identified unusual compounds, particularly methylglyoxal, that help explain Manuka honey's antibacterial activity.

Today, Manuka honey remains an important subject of scientific investigation.

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Research supports its antibacterial properties in laboratory settings, while selected medical-grade preparations have useful applications in wound care.

Honey can also soothe certain cough symptoms, although Manuka has not been proven superior to ordinary honey for this purpose.

The most compelling part of this story is the connection between traditional plant knowledge and contemporary science.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(169); });
A plant valued by Maori communities for generations has become the foundation of a globally recognized honey, and scientists are still exploring what its unique chemistry may offer modern medicine.

Read online: https://bestfolkmedicine.com/2026/11/ancient-maori-manuka-honey-benefits-antibacterial-wound-healing/
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