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## Papaya Leaf Tea as a Malaria Prophylactic?

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In *ECHO Development Notes* Issue 69 (September 2000), we asked if any in our network had heard of the use of papaya leaf tea for the treatment and/or prevention of malaria. We mentioned Dr. David Drake's informal observations, made when he was head of a mission hospital in Zimbabwe. Beginning in the early 1990s, many missionary families and African staff took papaya leaf tea regularly. They did not come down with malaria, even during seasons when many others in the area did.

The questions we asked in EDN 69 were: *Do you drink the tea yourself or know people who do? How do you make the tea? How often do you drink it? Do you know of people who drink the tea regularly and still get malaria?*

We received responses from more than a dozen people. Many more people wrote to ask us what we had learned. We have compiled the information into a Technical Note, using the questions as categories. Below is a brief summary of what we learn.

We heard back from people in many parts of the world. We learned that individuals in Brazil, Malawi, Togo, and Irian Jaya had heard of the use of papaya leaf tea to prevent malaria. Miriam Gebb wrote that it is given to schoolchildren in Irian Jaya twice a week, and the incidence of malaria has decreased. Fred and Paula Boley in Brazil wrote, "We are the only people we know who drink it regularly and haven't had malaria since starting to drink it." Donna Evans wrote that in Sulawesi, Indonesia, where she lived for nine years, local people make papaya leaf tea as a malaria preventative. She now lives in the Philippines, and said, "locals here have not heard about papaya leaf tea for malaria prevention."

Individuals from Togo, Tanzania, and Ghana also wrote to tell us that they had not heard of drinking papaya leaf tea to prevent malaria.

The book *Edible Leaves of the Tropics* contains some information about papaya leaves. It says the leaves may be cooked as a green vegetable. They should not be eaten raw because of the possible danger from both an alkaloid carpaine and the enzyme papain. Older leaves should be thoroughly boiled, changing the water at least twice. Younger leaves are not harmful. Upon cooking, the leaves have a pleasant color and retain their form and texture. They have a strong, bitter taste that is disagreeable to some people.

Several of the "recipes" we received for papaya leaf tea were very similar and can be summarized as follows:

Pick a papaya leaf (medium-sized; new; from near the top of the tree; one woman said to cut or tear it up) and boil it in enough water to cover the leaf (one person wrote that she uses two quarts of water). Bring it to a boil and let it steep (recommendations ranged from 5 minutes to 15 minutes). Drink ¼ cup of the tea, sweetened or unsweetened, twice a week.

There was remarkable consensus among three correspondents on the amount to drink. Even a paper in ECHO's files by C.K. Dresser, MD, lists papaya leaf tea at a dose of 50 to 60 ml, twice a week, as a malaria prophylaxis. He added, "The choices are many. None is 100% sure of success."

There were some variations in people's "recipes." We were told that some people in Indonesia and Irian Jaya eat young papaya leaves as a vegetable 2-3 times a week and report an anti-malarial effect. One couple told us that they eat dried, ground papaya leaf rather than drinking papaya leaf tea. They take a half teaspoon of finely ground dried papaya leaf twice a week.

Dr. Drake no longer lives in Zimbabwe, but he still uses papaya leaf tea when he travels. He has used papaya leaf powder bought in tea bags at health food stores in the U.S., and has also made the tea himself using a healthy dried green papaya leaf. He wrote, "We usually prepared the tea from a quarter teaspoon or one tea bag of dried crumbled papaya leaf, in a cup of hot water. We used it twice a week. It can be sweetened to taste, as it is slightly bitter." Dr. Drake emphasizes that in his experience, papaya leaf tea is only effective if it is taken consistently. It cannot be taken at random intervals.

Not everyone who has tried using papaya leaf tea has found it to be successful in preventing malaria. Some who have tried it still got malaria and moved on to other medications for future prophylaxis.

Sometimes even when papaya leaf tea has not completely prevented malaria, people have found that they experienced a greatly reduced incidence of the disease. For example, one couple in Togo ate dried, ground papaya leaf twice a week beginning in December 1999. They have had only one bout of malaria between them since that time, but had twelve bouts in the previous twelve months when they were using no malaria prophylaxis.

Andrew Hanibelsz, a journalist based in Hong Kong, suggested in a recent e-mail (June 2002) that papaya leaf tea might act as a mosquito repellent. He received the following information from a vet who has worked on numerous islands in Indonesia and with many different populations. Hanibelsz said that the tea works because the active compound is perspired through the skin, and that an unpleasant bitterness can be tasted on the skin as a result. He warned that papaya leaf tea may possibly cause liver damage after prolonged use, so the people there only use it when they go into the forest. He also advised that sugar should be avoided in malaria areas, as sweet sweat is said to attract mosquitoes.

Disclaimer: ECHO does NOT recommend that anyone stop taking their antimalarial medicine in order to try this treatment. The only evidence for the effectiveness of papaya leaf tea in the prevention of malaria is anecdotal. No studies have been done to scientifically demonstrate its effectiveness.

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