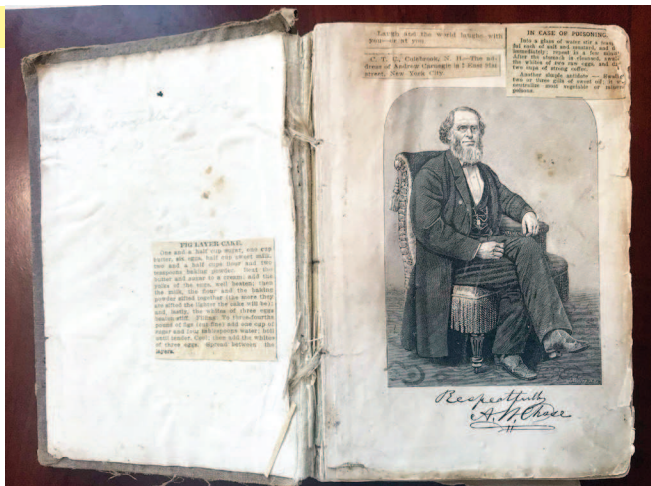


is fatally toxic when misused; lobelia, a family of flowers with a potent, nicotine-like toxin once believed to kill syphilis and bloodroot, another toxic flower known for its ability to “empty the bowels” and burn off skin tumors, with hideously disfiguring results.

I was beginning to realize Dr. Chase definitely subscribed to the “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” school of home medicine. Nevertheless, I persisted — until I got to the sore throat remedy that involved sulphuric acid.

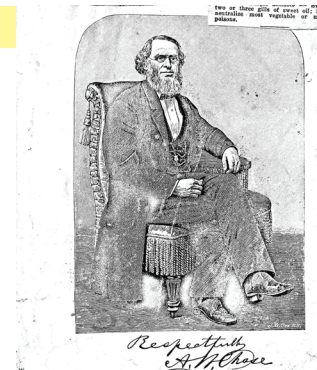


Natalie St. John

The inside cover of A.W. Chase's Second Receipt Book.

I decided to look up Dr. Chase. As it turned out, he

was never a doctor in the technical “having a med-



An engraved plate of the learned Dr. A.W. Chase.

ical degree” sense. Originally from Ohio, he started out as a traveling salesman, and audited medical classes because he didn’t know enough Latin to get accepted into the medical school. Using a combination of pseudo-science and relentless self-promotion, he went on to publish several popular books of domestic advice and start a Canadian company that successfully peddled “patent medicines” — the snake oil cures that rarely contained anything of therapeutic value. In other words, he was the Dr. Oz of his day. He died at 68.

Call Dr. Facebook

Clearly, the DIY medicine of yore was primarily effective as a form of population control, so I decided to turn to that great repository of medical information for the masses: Facebook. I joined a few groups for “Off the Grid” and “Crunchy” moms.

The Off-the-Grid ladies turned out to be mostly survivalist moms who worked on their farms 16 hours a day, stopping only to ask starkly practical questions like which gun is best for shooting aggressive coyotes. They were lovably nutty.

However, it quickly became evident that the crunchy moms shared a steadfast commitment to seeking medical advice from literally anyone but medical professionals. With each grisly new “Is this cancer?” and “My infant son’s ears are spouting geysers of neon-green pus and it seems like he can’t hear anymore.

What oils should I be giving him?” post, I felt a bit more uneasy.

I told my friend I was going to ask the group for advice about whether vaccinating my cows would give them autism, but someone beat me to it, asking if they should “vax” their pets. The crunchies almost unanimously agreed that it was a very dangerous practice indeed. One woman said her friend’s cat was “vaccine injured.” I was feeling sorely tempted to argue, so I got out of there before someone could throw a bottle of colloidal silver at me.

Google turned up myriad recipes for herbal tinctures, oxymels (a very old medicine made of herb-infused honey and vinegar), syrups and balms that reportedly work well on colds. Those probably deserve more attention, but given that they require special ingredients as well as knowledge and skill, there was precious little chance of me or anyone else making them while sick.

Drink your troubles away

Having unsuccessfully searched both history and cyberspace for the elusive secrets of DIY-cold-treatment, I decided at last to ask my own friends and family. They at least had a stake in not killing me and include in their number several medical professionals and a couple of knowledgeable herbalists.

I should have seen this coming — they almost unanimously agreed the best treatment for a cold was a hot toddy with one or two cold-fighting ingredients and plenty of whiskey or brandy. As this has always been my go-to cold treatment, I was officially back at square one.

With fingers weary from a hard day’s googling, I decided the key to getting through everyone-is-a-vector season might be a fortified toddy. Something just

medicinal enough to justify the booze, but still easy enough for a sick person to make and pleasant enough to drink voluntarily. Provided there wasn’t too much alcohol in it, the toddy would at least keep the sufferer hydrated, and certainly couldn’t do any more damage than the other suggestions I’d found.


The hottest toddy

Though the research is thin, some people swear bromelain, the main enzyme in pineapple, is both antiseptic and a very effective cough suppressant. Cut a few slices of fresh pineapple and put them in a big measuring glass.

Turmeric is wildly overhyped, but it does have proven inflammation-fighting abilities and a sunny orange color that is the exact opposite of winter. You can get fresh turmeric root at Freddy’s now, so grate some and throw it in.

While you’re at it, add several thin slices of ginger. Many non-western cultures believe you should fight colds with “hot” ingredients like ginger and cayenne, so why not? I have zero proof, but I think it clears the sinuses and makes you feel warm from the inside out.

Add a couple of tea bags. You can use black tea, green tea, which is a mild astringent, or any cold-fighting herbal tea. Teas with licorice, mallow and slippery elm do a nice job of soothing a sore throat. Add boiling water and let the brew steep for five minutes. Squeeze in at least one lemon for its vitamin C and antiseptic properties. Finally, add a good amount of honey, an antimicrobial that also helps coat irritated throats.

If you’re a grownup, you might as well add a modest glug of brandy or Irish whiskey. Alcohol is antiseptic, after all. And besides, if you drink it all up, no one can set it on fire underneath your chair. 

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