Long revered as a calming beverage, chamomile has powers extending far beyond simple relaxation.

chamomile

The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had divergent cultures spanning several millennia, but they had one thing in common: chamomile tea, their go-to potion for frayed nerves. It seems the ancients were spot-on—research indicates that apigenin, an anti-anxiety agent found in the delicate daisy-like flower, binds to the same receptors in the brain as prescription sedatives. What’s more, sipping the faintly apple-flavored brew isn’t the only way to get the benefit: When the calming effects of a full-body massage were tested on cancer patients using either plain or chamomile essential oil, "the chamomile group had significantly improved quality-of-life scores, decreased symptoms, and much less anxiety compared to the patients who were massaged with..."
plain oil," says Jonny Bowden, PhD, CNS, author of The Most Effective Natural Cures on Earth.

Chamomile calms more than the mind—it’s also effective at relaxing the gastrointestinal tract to ease gas and indigestion. In fact, chamomile was shown to relieve colic in infants twice as often as a placebo preparation. Researchers ascribe its cramp-stopping powers to bisabolol, an antispasmodic, as well as to glycine, an amino acid that may help relax the uterus, relieving PMS and menstrual symptoms.

The flower’s health perks don’t stop there: In an Imperial College of London study, researchers found that regular chamomile tea drinkers had elevated levels of hippurate, an antibacterial compound that can help fight infections brought on by colds. What’s more, hippurate levels stayed high for up to two weeks after their last sip! The proof is so solid that the German Commission E has approved chamomile for cough, bronchitis, and inflammation of the mouth, throat, and skin, says Bowden.

A chamomile compress can help relieve minor skin problems, from cuts and burns to rashes and cracked skin. Simply steep a tea bag, and let it cool, or mix dried tea with enough water to create a paste, apply to a piece of gauze, place on the affected area, and secure with surgical tape. “Chamomile contains anti-inflammatory flavonoids, namely apigenin, quercetin, and luteolin, that help relieve irritation,” says Ray Sahelian, MD, author of Mind Boosters: A Guide to Natural Supplements That Enhance Your Mind, Memory, and Mood. It’s also rich in azulene, a natural antihistamine that blocks the itching, swelling, and redness triggered by allergies and insect bites.

When shopping for chamomile, look for fresh flowers at farmers’ markets or select bulk German chamomile from the spice section or herbal tea display of a natural food store. (Fresh flowers are edible and can be used in salads and drinks.) For tea or liquid-based recipes, steep fresh or dried chamomile at least 10 minutes to bring out all the flavor. Dried flowers or tea bags can be turned into a “soup” for fruit salad, says Eric Bedoucha, executive pastry chef and co-owner of the Financier Patisserie in New York. In summer, he combines coins of fresh ginger, chamomile flowers, one tea bag “to strengthen the flavor,” and equal parts sugar and water in a saucepan, brings it to a boil, then removes it from the heat. “Wait till it stops boiling, then pour it over crisp apricots and blueberries—it softens the fruit, brings out a nice color, and adds subtle flavor,” he says.

You can also simply mix cooled chamomile tea with fruit juice for a refreshing spritzer or keep a pitcher of chamomile-infused lemonade (recipe below) in the fridge. That way, when you come home after a long, hot day, you can pour yourself a glass, let go of that stress, and just ... chill.

**CHAMOMILE LEMONADE**

Serves 6 • Vegan

If chamomile is not your cup of tea, this refreshing lemonade is a great new way to give the flower a try.

⅓ cup cane sugar  
2 Tbs. grated lemon zest  
5 Tbs. fresh or dried chamomile flowers, or 6 chamomile tea bags  
⅓ cup lemon juice  
Lemon slices, for garnish


2. Strain chamomile mixture into 2-qt. pitcher; stir in lemon juice and 3 cups water. Serve over ice with lemon slices, or store, covered, in refrigerator up to 5 days.

PER SERVING: 138 CAL; 0 G PROT; 0 G TOTAL FAT (0 G SAT FAT); 35 G CARB; 0 MG CHOL; 3 MG SOD; 0 G FIBER; 32 G SUGARS
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