

Up Close & Edible: Peppermint

by Jemimah Noonoo

(MSNBC) - Peppermint seems like a simple sweet treat, but it has some surprisingly powerful qualities. Not only is it good for common stomach ills and headaches, some researchers say it can alter your mind-set.

A whiff of peppermint helped people taking tests concentrate and do better on tasks that required sustained concentration, according to a 1992 study by University of Cincinnati researchers. "Not only do we get changes in performance, we also get changes in electrical activity in the brain, signifying increased attention," explains Joel Warm, professor of psychology at the University of Cincinnati. "The sensory nerves picking up odor also go to areas of the brain that control memory and emotion. That is perhaps why peppermint is useful."



And, what about your mood? Well, the next time you find yourself wanting to hurl an expletive at a driver who cut you off, you might try a peppermint.

At least that's what Bryan Raudenbush, a professor at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, says. In 2005, he conducted research that found the smell of peppermint could make your morning commute less frustrating and make you more alert behind the wheel. And in 2002, researchers found that peppermint could enhance athletic performance. Athletes who had a sniff of peppermint performed better than those who didn't. Talk about being in mint condition.

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One of the best uses of peppermint may be to help relieve the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, which can include abdominal cramping and pain and bloating. How does it work? Researchers say that menthol, the waxy, crystalline substance in peppermint oil, blocks calcium channels. This, in turn, helps relax muscles in the walls of the intestine. Sufferers can take the mint as a tea, or in peppermint capsules.

And if you just like the way the peppermint plant looks, you could adopt a tradition from the ancient Greeks and Romans, who were reputed to have had huge feasts where they used peppermint as decoration on their tables, and even wore it on their heads as crowns.