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ARNICA MASSAGE: Soothing life's little dings

BY: DENISE REYNOLDS

Remember when a kiss from mom was all it took to soothe life's little bumps and bruises? It was all so simple then. Life still deals out ouchies, but today's treatments are more apt to be do-it-yourself projects. Enter *Arnica Montana*, or Arnica for short, a 100 percent natural plant extract that's turning up in massage treatments at spas nationwide.

Weekend jocks and professional athletes hail Arnica's ability to improve certain injuries. If a sports injury is telling you that you're not as young as you used to be, you may want to consider giving Arnica a try. "Arnica is good for both acute injuries—sprained ankles or pulled muscles—and overuse injuries like sore, achy muscles," according to Dr. Steven Subotnick, a past Olympic team podiatrist and board certified reconstructive foot and ankle surgeon. He finds that topical use of Arnica really "speeds up the healing process and decreases pain."

Native to alpine slopes in mountainous regions, Arnica is a flowering plant, perfectly positioned for climbers with sore muscles. Centuries ago, shepherds pasturing their sheep in the mountains discovered that their flocks would nibble on the leaves of this plant whenever they stumbled and bruised themselves. Back in the 16th century, Europeans used Arnica as a topical treatment for skin disorders.

A member of the aster family, Arnica should be avoided by anyone with ragweed allergies and it should not be used if pregnant, or by those with heart conditions.

Sporting a lemony lavender smell with a hint of camphor, Arnica's yellow daisy-like flowers are dried and incorporated into oils and ointments. Board certified plastic surgeon Dr. Scott Greenberg of Orlando uses an herbal combination of Arnica and bromelain, a pineapple extract, to control post-op swelling and bruising. In combination, these have been shown to significantly decrease swelling and bruising, according to Dr. Greenberg. The plastic surgeon has patients begin using them three or four days prior to surgery and continue for a couple of weeks postsurgery.

To experience Arnica's ability to banish boo-boos, I travel to New Mexico and entrust my body to La Posada de Santa Fe Resort & Spa, a luxurious pueblo-style vil-

lage RockResort nestled on six lushly landscaped acres just two blocks from the historic Plaza. Native American artwork adorns the walls of the spa lounge at this exclusive hideaway, favored by celebrities for its high level of privacy. Calming shades of sage green highlight Southwestern décor that incorporates organic elements of stone, pottery and rustic wood detailing.

My therapist leads me to a cozy treatment room where I settle onto the table for my Arnica Muscle and Joint Massage. A locally woven blanket in rich hues of burnt orange, squash, and red adorns the massage table and lends additional warmth. The music of Carlos Nakai, world-renowned Native American flutist, imbues the space with sounds of his Navajo-Ute heritage.

Arnica has a long history of popular usage among the local Tewa tribe as a major healing plant and will get you back in the game in record time. To ease muscle soreness, my therapist uses Naturopathica's Arnica Muscle and Joint Oil, an anti-inflammatory blend of organically grown Arnica combined with basil, rosemary and bay laurel. She warms the oil in her hands, briskly rubbing them together to release its aromas, and then places her hands above my nose, instructing me to breathe deeply. She begins by using long, light massage strokes to stimulate my circulation. Gradually, she increases the intensity of her movements, bringing stagnant areas back into play.

Rapid strokes are alternated with slow ones to achieve maximum penetration of Arnica's benefits. As she encounters particularly tight spots, she goes deeper into the muscle tissue, allowing the Arnica oil to break up toxins and lactic acid build-up.

An hour later I emerge from my Southwestern sanctuary feeling as nurtured as a young child whose mommy just made everything all better. Let the games begin.

Spa specialist Denise Reynolds, whose column "Spa Pleasures" brings you reports on spa treatments from around the world, invites you to visit www.spapleasures.com for more information on the pleasures that await you at today's spas. Copyright © 2005