

The Universal Panacea: Chicken Soup

One of my favorite lectures is entitled “All the things they taught me in medical school and before that have turned out not to be true.” Examples abound, including the concept that eradicating premature ventricular contractions with antiarrhythmic drugs in a patient with heart disease prevents sudden death. Or, one of my mother’s favorites: don’t go swimming for an hour after you eat because this could cause stomach cramps and result in drowning! The first assertion has been clearly debunked by randomized controlled trials and extensive data from registries.^{1,2} The second assertion has not been studied, but I have never heard of a real-life example of this bizarre admonition.

In the middle of my lecture on false things that I was taught, there is a humorous slide showing a bowl of chicken soup with the title “Chicken soup cures all illnesses, especially if prepared by a loved one.” I do not believe that a randomized, double-blind study on the efficacy of chicken soup to cure, or at least ameliorate, all illnesses exists; however, I am still convinced that it is true!

Tonight, I found myself thinking about the topic of chicken soup while enjoying 2 bowls of my spouse’s version—a nutritional hybrid of Eastern and Western cuisine, containing chopped Chinese cabbage, onions, peas, sliced ginger, and bay leaves, along with, of course, cooked rice and bones with some meat from left over roasted chicken. Over many years of travelling, my wife and I have enjoyed many different versions of chicken soup while visiting various parts of the globe: China, Denmark, France, Argentina, Mexico, the Caribbean, Russia, Lithuania, and other countries. Chicken soup is enjoyed throughout the world.

Given the widespread consumption of chicken soup, I decided to perform a literature search on the internet, PubMed, and Amazon to see if any information were avail-

able concerning the curative properties of this globally enjoyed dish. The results were remarkable.

A Google search brought up many pages of references including a Wikipedia article with the following information:

Chicken soup is . . . made from chicken, simmered in water, usually with various other ingredients. The classic chicken soup consists of a clear chicken broth, often with pieces of chicken or vegetables; common additions are pasta, noodles, dumplings, or grains such as rice and barley. Chicken soup has acquired the reputation of a folk remedy for colds and influenza, and in many countries is considered a comfort food. Humans were already boiling food by the time chicken was domesticated in the neolithic period, so it is likely that chickens were being boiled for soup at that time. Modern American chicken soup, which typically includes root vegetables such as carrot, onion, leeks and celery, was a staple across Northern Europe and was brought to the United States by immigrants.³

The Wikipedia article contains descriptions of various forms of chicken soup from 24 different countries on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. Nevertheless, I am sure the Aussies also enjoy chicken soup, as do scientists working in research entities on the icy continent who consume hot chicken soup with pleasure! Campbell’s American canned chicken soup was made famous throughout the world by Andy Warhol’s painting of this widely consumed entity.

The question concerning chicken soup’s medicinal qualities has been extensively discussed in the popular media.^{4–6} However, there are few scientific observations to support the widespread belief that chicken soup has beneficial medicinal effects.

A PubMed search of the term “chicken soup” returned 206 references with many referring to work done at the University of Nebraska Medical Center published in *Chest* in 2000.⁷ This laboratory investigation found that chicken soup inhibited neutrophil migration and hence may be anti-inflammatory. Other investigators disputed the findings, and there were many letters to the editor following the publication of the Nebraska study—some serious and others tongue-in-cheek.^{8,9} A review of Amazon books involving the topic of chicken soup returned more

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Requests for reprints should be addressed to Joseph S. Alpert, MD, 1501 N. Campbell Avenue, Tucson, AZ, 85724-5037.

E-mail address: jalpert@arizona.edu

than 4000 entries with many of the texts written for children. It seems clear that the next generation is already being indoctrinated to love chicken soup whether it has medicinal properties or not.

My conclusion remains the same as quoted above from the slide that is part of the lecture on things that I was taught that turned out not to be true: chicken soup has physical and particularly psychological beneficial effects in humans, especially when prepared by a loved one. I always have a great sense of well-being after finishing a bowl of my spouse's chicken soup!

As always, I look forward to hearing from readers about this commentary, and I will always respond. It is likely that there will be many responses, some serious and some humorous! Please send comments to jalpert@arizona.edu

Joseph S. Alpert, MD
*University of Arizona School of
Medicine, Tucson
Editor in Chief,
The American Journal of Medicine*

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