



NCFH
National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc.



FOLK MEDICINE AND TRADITIONAL HEALING

Background

- Folk medicine is the mixture of traditional healing practices and beliefs that involve herbal medicine, spirituality and manual therapies or exercises in order to diagnose, treat or prevent an ailment or illness.¹ The World Health Organization states that it is mostly practiced by indigenous or native populations and as much as 80% of the population in certain countries within Asia and Africa rely on it for primary care.²
- Folk Medicine may also be referred to as alternative medicine, holistic medicine and Eastern Medicine (named after its historic practice in countries of Asia, particularly China³).
- Western medicine also referred to as allopathic medicine, scientific medicine or biomedicine, uses healing practices based on scientific evidence and research. Today, this is referred to as conventional medicine.⁴
- Curanderismo is a form of folk healing among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and is one of the more common healing belief systems found among Latino immigrants in the U.S. today.⁵

History

- Through modern-day research and the studying of history, we know that cultures have always used plant or plant properties to treat or alleviate different illnesses.⁶
- Traditional medicine and its healing practices is about as old as written human history. Ancient Mesopotamia, which is the modern-day Middle East, is where the oldest texts about traditional medicine were found and sourced back to about 2100 BCE. There is evidence in clay tablets that sorcery, prayer and medicinal plants were used but also more conventional forms of medicine such as washing and bandaging.⁷
- There are significant civilizations of ancient Mexico that were also known for their alternative medicine practices. The Mayas of Central America and Southern and Central Mexico (2000 BCE to 250 AD⁸) had a very holistic view of illness and healing. Essentially, health was viewed as a balance that occurred between your physical condition, nature, the cosmos, etc. and different components were used to improve health such as medicinal plants, religious ceremonies and spiritual guides.⁹
- The Aztecs of Central Mexico (1300 AD to 1519 AD and the post-conquest period)¹⁰ also had extensive practices with contemporary medicine. For example, they treated headaches by inhaling tobacco and other herbs and scabies were treated by washing the skin and applying avocado.¹¹
- According to a recent study, 80% of agricultural workers identify as Hispanic, with 69% identifying as Mexican.¹² The folk medicine practices of Mexico, therefore, are very significant for modern-day agricultural workers.

- As mentioned earlier, folk medicine is practiced by mostly indigenous or native populations around the world.¹³ “Mestizos” (a term used in Mexico) refers to the subculture, practices and beliefs that have resulted from the historical mixture of the indigenous and Spanish cultures, since 1519.¹⁴ In other parts of Latin America, the term is “Ladino” and studies frequently suggest that this word is used among the former and current Mayan regions of the Americas.^{15, 16, 17}
- Whether the term is Mestizo or Ladino, evidence suggest that today’s Hispanic farmworkers practice a form of folk medicine that has ties to the many facets of their history: influence of the Moors and the Spanish, Christian-Judeo thinking and, of course, Aztec culture and influence.¹⁸

Agricultural Workers and Health

In Practice

- Folk medicine is practiced by a majority of the Mexican population while in Mexico, especially among the poor and uninsured.¹⁹ It is therefore no surprise that these beliefs survive and resurface once people and populations cross international borders.
- There are many types of alternative or folk medicine practitioners among the Hispanic community. A “sobador” is a manual therapist who offers chiropractic or physical therapies.²⁰ In his research article, Servando Hinojosa discusses two key components on why sobadores are so popular among the South Texas Hispanic community. First, there is a common cultural understanding regarding spirituality and healing that fosters trust between the patient and the sobador, and second, the heavily agricultural area often results in workers suffering from occupational or workplace injuries.²¹
- Herbalism is also a common practice where components of a plant or plants (berries, root, leaves, etc) are used for their medicinal properties.²² A person who practices herbalism is called a yerbero. Some examples of medicinal herbs include chamomile (manzanilla) which is taken as a tea for its calming properties, aloe vera (zabila) which is used topically on the skin to cure bites, rashes, etc. and eucalyptus (eucalipto) which is used as a tea to alleviate and help symptoms associated with the common cold.²³
- Curanderismo is seen as a combination of the above mentioned practices with a few other components. The practice also assumes a social network of a relative or relatives who can diagnose the illness and act as curandero, a relationship between illness, healing and religion, and an underlying belief and trust among the Hispanic community about symptoms, healing practices and the source of illness.²⁴
- A few common folk illnesses that a curandero would diagnose and treat would be mal de ojo (evil eye), susto (fright sickness), mollera caida (fallen fontanelle), and empacho (digestive disorder).^{25, 26}
- Mal de ojo is defined as an illness that is inflicted due to envy. When the glances of admiration of a stronger person are inflicted on another for too long, usually on a child, it is said that mal de ojo occurs.²⁷ The associated symptoms include high fever, fretfulness, headaches and crying.²⁸ For treatment, an egg must be rubbed among the child’s body, while prayer is conducted.²⁹
- Susto is defined as resulting from a startling or frightful occurrence or scare which has caused the soul to temporarily leave the body.³⁰ Susto is also believed to be associated with depression, an association which has been documented in research.³¹ The symptoms associated with it include loss of appetite and weight, lack of motivation and listlessness. The

treatment of susto involves sweeping the body with herbs three times while prayer is conducted.³²

- Mollera caida is the condition such as fallen fontanelle in which the soft spot on top of a baby's head is marked with an indentation.³³ It is believed to be caused by bouncing a baby too roughly or removing a nipple or bottle from the baby's mouth too suddenly. It is also marked by the baby having a bulging palate, fever, vomiting and crying.³⁴ The treatment involves applying salve to the baby's head and pressing on the baby's palate.³⁵ It is important to note here how a curandero's diagnosis may be very much in line with those of contemporary medicine, despite how the treatment process may differ. While in the United States, a mother would be told that a fallen fontanelle is a sign of advanced dehydration. However, both a curandero and a Western practitioner would see mollera caida as a severe condition that requires immediate attention.
- Empacho can refer to a number of digestive disorders, and is more common among infants and children, but can be diagnosed in adults as well. Empacho can encompass constipation, diarrhea, stomach upset, gas, and other symptoms. Treatments vary based on the country of origin, but often include massages and folk remedies such as olive oil and herbal remedies.³⁶

The Healthcare Perspective

- Understanding, diagnosing and treating these conditions or illnesses by clinicians becomes difficult due to the differences in medical and cultural perspectives that must be overcome by health center staff.
- Besides language and cultural barriers serving as obstacles, use of alternative or folk medicine is difficult to determine because patients are very often afraid that healthcare professionals will judge or ridicule them for their belief systems.³⁷ Many patients claim that they do not inform their doctors of alternative medicine or alternative treatments simply because their doctors do not ask about them.³⁸
- Patients also report that they would appreciate their doctors asking what home remedies they are using as treatment, if they remained open-minded, and if doctors understood folk medicine.³⁹
- Another common barrier within healthcare delivery is that alternative or traditional medicine within the Latino culture is deeply rooted in spirituality and religion.⁴⁰ While in the United States, discussing the basis of illness from a spiritual perspective with a doctor or clinician may not always be well-received.
- A study published in 2010 which interviewed 96 Latino immigrants regarding traditional medicine and religion concluded that 75% thought prayer was an important part of healing and 90% said they frequently pray for their health or the health of their families.⁴¹
- Healthcare staff can and would benefit from knowledge and training on Hispanic traditional medicine. Whether treatments or beliefs may differ, an awareness of the symptoms associated with certain illnesses and curanderismo practices will facilitate the diagnosis and treatment of a sick patient.

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