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## *Graedons' Guide to*

# *Unique Uses for Vicks*

## **Antifungal Action?**

- We first heard about using Vicks for toenail fungus from Jane Kelley, RN, a foot care nurse from Richmond, Massachusetts. She had been advising her clients to soak their feet in a dilute vinegar bath (one part vinegar to two parts water). Almost as an afterthought, Jane mentioned that she had heard from some other foot care nurses that patients were also getting benefit from applying Vicks VapoRub to their nails twice daily. You have to be persistent for this to work. We have learned that some of the essential oils in Vicks have anti-fungal activity. And herbal experts suggest that such oils work synergistically. That is, the combined effect is greater than that of any single component.

### **Other Uses for Vicks**

- Paper cuts
- Warts
- Splinters
- Cold Sores
- Smear on the bird feeder pole to keep squirrels away

**Vicks VapoRub** in its squat blue jar is an American icon known around the world. For many people, its distinctive aroma of camphor, menthol and eucalyptus oil brings back memories of loving treatment for childhood colds or congestion.

This product dates back more than a century, but there is, surprisingly, some disagreement about its exact origins. Pharmacist Lunsford Richardson moved his family from Selma to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1890. His three young children caught nasty colds that winter, and the usual treatments of the time, poultices and a vaporizing lamp, were messy and inconvenient.

As family legend has it, Richardson had traveled in France and observed the use of menthol, an exotic ingredient from Japan. He set to work and developed a croup and pneumonia salve containing menthol, camphor, eucalyptus oil, cedarleaf oil, nutmeg oil, thymol and turpentine oil. Richardson named his new creation for his brother-in-law, Dr. Joshua Vick. Not only was Dr. Vick well-known and respected in town, he also had a name short enough to fit on labels pasted on the lids of the blue jars.

Some dissenters have pointed out that Richardson might have learned about a special salve that was dispensed from the pharmacy in Goldsboro where he used to work. But it's hard to document the actual origins of the formula and how closely Vicks VapoRub resembles that earlier ointment.

What really made Vicks successful was the horrible flu season of 1918. This was the worst epidemic America had ever seen. Forty million people died around the world; half a million succumbed in the United States alone. People were so terrorized by this unusually virulent infection that they were eager to try any remedy that might help with congestion. Sales of Vicks VapoRub soared from \$900,000 to almost \$3 million in that one year. Back in those days, that was a lot of money!

There are two approved uses for Vicks: first, it can be rubbed on chest and throat to relieve coughs and nasal congestion; and second, it can be applied to sore muscles to relieve minor aches and pains. The camphor, eucalyptus oil and menthol are recognized as effective for cough suppression and decongestion, but the other essential oils found in Vicks are considered "inactive" ingredients. We suspect that the cedarleaf oil, nutmeg oil, thymol and turpentine oil may play some role in a few of the unusual purposes people have found for this medicine-chest staple.

We should point out that Vicks is intended for external use only. Camphor can be poisonous if taken internally, so keep Vicks VapoRub out of eyes, nose and mouth. Don't apply it under tight bandages, and keep it away from wounds and broken skin. Use your common sense, and don't use Vicks when medical attention is needed.

## Nail Fungus

We cannot explain why some people get such amazing results from Vicks. Many report that their nails start looking better within several weeks, though it takes months for prescription anti-fungal drugs to work. Others report that Vicks is not effective. Here are some letters on this topic.

**“People using VapoRub must be consistent, or their efforts can be a waste of time. They should smear the ointment on and around the affected nail once or twice a day. The preparation gradually penetrates and softens the nail, making it easier to remove the damaged portion as the nail grows forward. Some cases resolve in 6 months. Serious cases take longer. I recommend that my clients check with their MD’s or other primary care providers to ascertain there are no conflicts in the use of VapoRub with their medications.”**

Jane Kelley, R.N.

“I read in your column that some readers had good luck clearing toenail fungus with Vicks VapoRub. I have suffered with this in both feet for years, and doctors were never able to offer anything effective. I immediately began using the VapoRub every night before bedtime and all signs of fungus in my toenails cleared within a few weeks!

I travel to tropical destinations frequently and I always had to hide my feet in closed-toe shoes or under the towel. I’m off to the nearest shoe store to buy open-toe sandals!”

“I was told years ago there was no hope for my toenail fungus but to remove the nail surgically. I didn’t want any part of that. Luckily, I finally read about the Vicks and tried it. I am happy to say I am growing a new toenail that looks normal. It took a few months, but it worked and I am in sandals again.”

“I had a toenail fungus so bad, little white things on the left big toe were already eating away at the nail. My family doc said, ‘It will take three visits for three treatments, and the medicine is hard on the liver.’ The kicker was: the prescription would cost \$700.

My friend, a podiatrist, said the same thing but told me not to worry about the liver problem. A week later, the day before Judy (my wife) and I were to leave on a month-long trip to Europe, she read your column about using, of all things, Vicks VapoRub to kill toenail fungus. As soon as we got to Zermatt, Switzerland, we stepped off the train and there was an international pharmacy. I immediately bought a small jar of Vicks and applied my first treatment.

The next morning the white things were gone. Six weeks later now, I have no sign of toenail fungi! My toenails look better every day and I’m only applying it once a week. I probably should share the \$700 I saved with you. But I spent it in Europe!”

## PROBLEMS WITH VICKS VAPORUB

Vicks VapoRub is not appropriate in every situation. According to one home health nurse, “When I heard about Vicks VapoRub for toenail fungus, I began telling my patients about it. They began using it on their very thick accumulation of hardened fungus. One lady’s was gone within one to two weeks, but it destabilized her great toenail and it is painful. The nail has dissolved and looks like she will lose it. She is diabetic, so it is more serious. I have stopped advocating Vicks for this use unless the fungus is in its earliest stages.”

Another person developed an allergic rash after applying Vicks VapoRub to her chest: “The next morning the area where I had rubbed the Vicks was red and warm to the touch and very itchy. Over the next two days, it went from itching to burning and the area showed little bumps.” People can be allergic to almost anything, from prescription drugs to herbs. The ingredients in Vicks (camphor, eucalyptus oil, menthol, cedarleaf oil, nutmeg oil, thymol and turpentine oil) could easily trigger reactions in some people.

Be wary of any remedy that calls for internal applications of Vicks VapoRub (inside the mouth or nose, for example). Camphor can be toxic, and the manufacturer specifically warns against taking by mouth or putting Vicks in nostrils, as well as heating it or using it near an open flame, putting it on an open wound or applying it under a tight bandage. These safety precautions designed to prevent excess absorption of camphor may apply to the hemorrhoid controversy. [See the next page.]

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Several people have reported to us their experiences with Vicks for hemorrhoids:

- “A while back I ran out of Preparation H for my hemorrhoids, but Vicks VapoRub was handy. I tried it, and found it burned a few seconds, but then relieved the itching for several hours. Now I prefer to use Vicks.”
- “I am a retired nurse. After 5 pregnancies, I developed a bad case of hemorrhoids but my doctor did not want to do surgery. I started using Vicks Vaporub for this problem about

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“...in a clinical setting where no one could see me, I scientifically applied a sufficient amount of VapoRub to the inflamed area and waited for results. I’d like to report to Joe Graedon that almost immediately, I could breathe better. In an essay I’m writing for *The New England Journal of Medicine*, I state that: ‘After applying VapoRub to the hemorrhoids, I had no respiratory problems in my pants.’

“What really happened is that the active ingredients in VapoRub—which I think are menthol, camphor and napalm—instantly engulfed my hemorrhoidal locality in spontaneous combustion. The warmth of VapoRub on a congested chest might be comforting; applying it to the most sensitive escape route in

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- “Our family uses Vicks for chapped lips. It also works for bringing slivers to a head and healing cracks around finger nails and finger tips. But it needs to be applied often.”

- “I have a tried-and-true remedy for Vicks that I’ve never heard from anyone else. I periodically get a little split in the corner of my mouth. It’s

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A number of people have mentioned that applying a bit of Vicks VapoRub to the temples can alleviate a headache. Others like to put it on the forehead. Take the precaution of keeping it well away from the eyes, as it

20 years ago. After my nightly bath, I dry the area thoroughly and apply Vick. This shrinks the hemorrhoids overnight and soothes them.”

People have suggested so many odd uses for Vicks VapoRub that we are no longer surprised. Vicks contains a petrolatum base (which itself might be soothing) and several essential oils, including menthol, camphor and eucalyptol, which might have some benefit. We remind you that Vicks is for external use only, and that goes for hemorrhoids, too.

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the human abdomen made me imagine I was a jet fighter with afterburners. I moved distractedly through the house like an F-15 pilot saying: ‘Mayday! Mayday! I took a direct hit to my tail section! Eject! Eject! There’s a fire in my cockpit!’ Well, not the cockpit, really. I forget the military term for butt. “The use of VapoRub for hemorrhoids was supposed to be a home remedy, although obviously it has military applications...I must politely report to Joe Graedon that while it’s possible that a few people might benefit from VapoRub on their hemorrhoids, I think most people will respond with such well-known expressions as, ‘Shots fired! Officer down! We have casualties!’”

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painful and used to take forever to heal. Frequently it would crack open again when it was nearly healed. Then I began using just a dab of Vicks on it. If I get to it at the first sign of the problem, most of the time it stops before it gets started. Even if I don’t catch it in time, the Vicks cures it quickly.”

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could irritate them. Even the vapors might be irritating.

According to one reader, “I find it very cooling and the headache goes away. I have been using a dab of Vicks on my forehead for years.”

## ***Hemorrhoids***

### ***A Dissenting View***

John Welter, writing in the *Durham Herald-Sun* March 24, 2001  
Durham, N.C.

### ***Chapped Lips***

Don’t lick lips coated in Vicks or get VapoRub inside the mouth. It’s for external use only.

### ***Headache Relief***

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Several readers have made the logical leap from fungus in nails to fungus on skin or scalp.

• “I have been suffering with some sort of scaly dandruff on my scalp for three years. I’ve spent way too much on prescriptions from the dermatologist, with no cure. Last year I read about Vicks for fungus under the nails and decided to try it. A jar of Vicks cost just over \$5. It softened the tight scales, and in two more weeks I had no more scales or itch.”

• “I have a scalp condition for which I have used Nizoral for years. It also affects my facial skin and eyebrows, causing scaling and itching. I have used a prescription cortisone cream for this, but it is no

longer very effective. After reading about the person who used Vicks for bad dandruff, I tried it on my face and had almost immediate results. The scales in the nose creases disappeared overnight.

“The scaling on my forehead and in my eyebrows is also disappearing but more slowly. I have to be careful to apply a very thin layer of Vicks so as not to cause eye problems. People might think that any ointment would clear this up, but I have tried lots of prescription creams and they made no difference whatsoever.”

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“For more years than I can remember, I’ve had an allergy to mosquito bites. Now I don’t suffer long. With a touch of Vicks the itching and redness are gone. If I get bitten by fleas this year I’ll try it on them too.”

We were also told by a member of the Richardson family that some people in the family have used Vicks to soothe the pain of wasp stings. We can vouch for it on mosquito bites.

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“I was pleased to read about Vicks VapoRub for toenail fungus. We’ve been using it on bruises and sore muscles for three years. Recently I tried it on my tennis elbow and it worked miracles. The elbow was all better in less than five days

instead of the usual two to three months.”

This use is hardly surprising. The official Vicks label states: “On aching muscles temporarily relieves minor aches and pains.”

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We heard a surprising way to use Vicks VapoRub for night-time coughs from a nurse in North Carolina:

“I learned this from somebody at church. I had one child at that time, and she had a bad cough that was real croupy. A friend had mentioned this to my mother-in-law, and she passed it along. I figured, you know, it can’t hurt and might help.

“It seemed to work. I’ve used it on my children ever since when they have a cough, especially a cold with a croupy cough. When you’re lying in bed and trying to sleep and all of a sudden you sit up with a hacking cough, that’s an opportune time to use it. Put the Vicks on the bottom of the foot, on the soft part between the ball of the foot and the heel. You don’t have to massage it much; I just

put it on. Then, because it’s so greasy, I put socks on. Then they lay down and the cough quiets down and they can sleep.

“I’m real careful about who I tell this to, because people think you’re wacko. But I was talking with another friend at church recently. Her husband had bronchitis, and the cough he had was keeping everyone in the house awake. I told her how to use the Vicks VapoRub and she came back about a week later saying he really wanted to thank me. It worked.

“I have a daughter who’s 11, so I’ve been using it for eleven years.”

## ***Dandruff & Seborrheic Dermatitis***

Keep in mind that a petrolatum-based product like Vicks may be difficult to remove from hair. One approach to this problem is to cut it with mineral oil first, then shampoo the mineral oil out.

## ***Mosquito Bites & Wasp Stings***

## ***Tennis Elbow***

## ***Night-time Cough***

“Here is another unusual use for Vicks. When young intact male horses are in training, their interest in learning to be race horses is easily diverted by the scent of estrous from fillies. A generous smearing of Vicks in both nostrils of these young Romeos blocks the enticing odors and keeps their attention on their work.”