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A range of poultices and scrubs featured in luxurious body treatments at the Song Saa Resort in Cambodia, songsaa.com

Pretty Poultices

A spotlight on a therapeutic—and trending—spa treatment

by Sandra Ramani

As an increasing number of spas around the world are incorporating heated herbal poultices into their massages and body treatments, we're taking a closer look at this therapy, what it's good for and why it's suddenly so (ahem) hot.

The Basics Unbleached muslin, cotton or linen bags are filled with herbs, tied into tight pouches, steamed, then rhythmically stamped, kneaded and rocked over the body. The technique can be used as part of a regular massage or in place of traditional strokes. The heat helps relax muscles, while the potent herbs have therapeutic effects.

The Backstory "Poultice use is a very ancient technique," explains Hayley Louise Dack, director of The Imperial Spa and Salon in New Delhi, India. →

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"Over the centuries, many indigenous groups have developed their own hand-made versions. Though the ingredients might vary, the principle is the same."

The treatment is mostly found in Thailand, Southeast Asia and India, and Dack reveals that it was also used historically on soldiers (as recently as WWI and WWII) to help draw out toxins from battle injuries and treat abscess wounds.

The Ingredients Ingredients vary depending on the country, but most poultices include lemongrass (to help regenerate connective tissue, stimulate lymphatic detox and treat water retention); Kaffir lime (to tone skin); camphor (to stimulate the circulatory and nervous systems, and ease muscle spasms); turmeric (an anti-inflammatory and immune booster); and other native spices and herbs. Depending on the treatment, rice or sand may also be part of the mix.

The Benefits As Dack explains, poultices can reduce inflammation, promote circulation, relieve joint pain and stiffness, calm muscle spasms, improve mobility and flexibility, boost the immune system and tone the skin. The warmth of the pouches, rocking motion of the therapy, and aroma of the herbs combine to create a deeply soothing experience.

Who Is It For? "Poultice massage works on a deeper level than just massage therapy, as it goes into the belly of the muscle groups for maximum benefits, encouraging circulation and lymphatic drainage," says Dack. It is ideal for clients suffering from jet lag, lethargy, hormonal imbalance and muscle pain, as well as those recovering from an illness (or who feel one coming on). In some countries, the treatment is used as a part of weight loss and detox programs, or an alternative medicine regime.

Where to Try It At The Imperial's Mughal-inspired spa, the on-site Ayurvedic doctor may prescribe a Njavara Kizhi treatment, where poultices made with a mix of rice, herbs and milk are applied following a rigorous oil massage (theimperialindia.com). At the Shangri-La Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, the "Sense of Place" spa menu includes a traditional 90-minute Royal Thai Herbal Compress Massage (shangri-la.com), while The Peninsula New York was inspired by its sister hotel in Bangkok to offer a two-hour ritual with body exfoliation, wrap, head massage and body massage with herbal poultices filled with herbs like lemongrass and ginger (newyork.peninsula.com).

TIP: Many spas will let you take home a poultice from your service, so be sure to ask. They can be resteamed a few more times and applied to sore muscles at home. Treatment shown here from the Imperial Spa & Salon in New Delhi, India.

