

COOL customer

Gill Cox investigates why Aloe vera is celebrated the world over as a wonder treatment for everything from sunburn to irritable bowel.

Victoria Beckham is apparently a fan of Aloe Vera juice, believing it may help maintain her skinny frame. I can't say there's evidence to support Aloe Vera's use as a weight loss aid, but then solid studies on Aloe vera are thin on the ground. That's not because people haven't found it helpful – inner and outer body – many swear by it. Lack of evidence comes from the fact that you can't patent plants, so drug companies – which cough up for most clinical research – aren't interested in funding the expensive business of trials.

Last December, however, there was a bit of welcome news. The *British Journal of Dermatology* published a study suggesting Aloe vera can treat oral lichen planus. This affects more women than men, and produces white patches on the inside of the mouth, and sometimes mouth ulcers, with accompanying burning, stinging and pain. It was a small study – only 54 patients, half treated with Aloe vera gel, half a placebo. 81% of those

treated with Aloe vera had a good response, compared to only 4% of placebo patients. As oral lichen planus can be hard to budge, this is good news indeed, especially as in rare cases cancerous changes can occur within an ulcer.

Better still, the British Association of Dermatologists welcomed this 'interesting development', and acknowledged that Aloe vera has proven anti-inflammatory and wound-healing properties.

Aloe vera is a member of the Lily family, and related to onions, garlic and asparagus. It's a succulent, easily grown indoors in the UK (one thrives in our conservatory), and has also been called 'the wand of heaven' and 'the silent healer'.

The inner lining of fleshy Aloe leaves – used for Aloe latex or Aloe juice – contains Aloin, traditionally used as a laxative. Some sufferers of irritable bowel find it helpful, and some with ulcerative colitis claim it helps calm their guts. It tastes

Aloe vera is easily grown indoors in the UK and has also been called 'the wand of heaven' and 'the silent healer'.

rather bitter, which some find off-putting. Adding it to fruit juice can help the medicine go down.

Enthusiasts believe the juice can help boost immunity – even, some say, reduce the risk of developing lung cancer. No support for that one from Cancer Research UK.

The central part of the leaf holds the gel. It's this gel I keep it in my medicine cabinet as – even though studies are thin – I found it cools and helps heal superficial burns. It's also, I think, great for relieving skin suffering a bit of sunshine over-exposure. Personally I wouldn't bother with aftersun creams professing to contain Aloe Vera. They may not contain enough active ingredient to do much. I stick with pure gel, and **Forever Living** is one of the the reputable brands (www.foreverliving.com).

I hope few of us ever need Aloe Vera for this, but burns

can be one side-effect of radiotherapy, and Cancer Research UK report that some specialist nurses and radiotherapists recommend using the gel. Many patients have found it soothing and healing – though, again, there's no real clinical evidence. Where America's famous Mayo Clinic thinks there's good scientific support for his age-old healer is in treating seborrhoeic dermatitis

(severe dandruff) and psoriasis.

Seborrhoeic dermatitis is called cradle cap in babies, and it's fairly common in young adults too. The scaly, crusty patches that lift from scalp are unsightly, so applying 30% Aloe lotion twice-daily for four to six weeks to get rid of it may not be as much a cosmetic nightmare as the condition itself.

For treating psoriasis the Mayo Clinic notes a successful trial using the 0.5% extract in a

hydrophilic cream, but adds that additional research is needed.

Trying Aloe Vera has never been known to do anyone any harm – though I have to add one caution. Buyer beware. Lots of products claimed to contain Aloe. However, anything 'dried', for instance, is likely to have lost any benefits in the drying process.

Finally – you can get Aloe Vera products for pets. If, like me, you find many dog's coat conditioners smell akin to sticky 'magic trees', you may prefer **Forever Living's** veterinary formula animal coat conditioner.

