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# **The Kettle is Singin' of Cod Liver Oil**

by

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## **Abstract**

The bane of many a child's life in Newfoundland in the twentieth century may have been called "cod liver oil." Although this foul-tasting oil has been produced in Newfoundland since the mid-1800s, it seemed to increase in popularity in the early 1900s for a number of factors, including social notions of vitamins and heavy advertising. Throughout its history of use, it has been used for conditions ranging from rheumatism to rickets. Although heavily popular in Newfoundland, other parts of the world also promoted the oil to solve public health issues.

Although a great source of vitamins A and D, the introduction of vitamin supplements in more palatable forms largely eliminated the everyday dose of cod liver oil from a child's diet. However, the supplement has increased in popularity for other reasons. Regardless of the indication, the oil is not fondly remembered for its taste but for its curative properties, which have even been hailed in the well-known folk song "Cod Liver Oil." In this paper, I will describe the development of commercial cod liver oil in Newfoundland and analyze possible reasons for its increased popularity in the early twentieth century. I will also discuss some past and present uses of the oil with a focus on its use in Newfoundland and the validity of the claims of this miracle product.

## **Introduction**

The bane of many children's lives in Newfoundland may have been called "cod liver oil." An entire generation was raised on this foul tasting liquid that was promoted as the ultimate in nutritional supplements. Although the oil was produced in Newfoundland since the mid-1800s, it seemed to increase in popularity in the early 1900s for a number of factors. Elsewhere in the world, cod liver oil was promoted by chemists and used to treat and prevent a number of medical conditions from rickets to rheumatism. With the introduction of vitamin supplements in a tastier form, the everyday dose of cod liver oil has largely been eliminated from a child's diet; however, the supplement has increased in popularity for other reasons.

Cod liver oil has long been a component of the medicine cabinets of Newfoundlanders. Initially, the oil used by Newfoundlanders was as a homemade "raw form." This form of the oil was prepared by fermentation of cod livers in barrels and was brown in color. It is remembered as having a flavor of rotting fish and included such adverse effects as giving the sweat of its users a distinct smell. However, cod liver oil took on a new face with commercial products that used various production methods to create refined cod liver oil. The processed oil lacked the smell of rotting fish and was flax colored (Crellin, 1994). The new look and smell may have contributed to wider popularity of the oil for the general public.

## The History of Cod Liver Oil in Newfoundland

The history of cod liver oil production in Newfoundland involves an exciting and profitable industry for the province. There are records that as early as 1855 over 67 thousand gallons of cod liver oil were being exported, bringing into the province almost 140,000 dollars in 1855 (Munn, 1925). Previous to production in Newfoundland, the majority of cod liver oil distributed in international markets came from Norway. However, the oil found in the livers of Newfoundland cod was found to be richer in vitamin A and other nutrients (Munn, 1925). Scientists at the time attributed this in part to the livers of the cod being leaner; this was due to the Newfoundland fishing season occurring in the summer and catching the fish while they were waiting to replenish themselves on the summer vegetation. The Newfoundland oil was of such good quality that it received international recognition. An extract from the "Medical Times" of London, August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1849, stated that it was "[...] gratifying to know that [...] wholesale druggists (London) have established a manufacture of cod liver oil in Newfoundland [...]. We have received a specimen of their oil, it is remarkably pure, and we strongly recommend it to the consideration of our readers" (Munn, 1925). Actual scientific investigation of the quality of the Newfoundland oil was carried out in 1925 by a Canadian drug company. The company used rats fed with a diet fortified with cod liver oil to prove the quality of the cod liver oil from Newfoundland. The experiment was a success and the oil was further studied to determine its content and vitamin potency (Stahl, 2008).

This new product continued to gain popularity in the early 1900s for a number of reasons. As mentioned above, the improved physical characteristics of the oil may have contributed to wider use by the general public. Another dominant factor in increasing popularity was the heavy advertising of the various cod liver oil products. Cod liver oil was sold under various brands, one of which was Scott's emulsion distributed by Gerald S. Doyle Ltd. The businessman Gerlad S. Doyle (1892-1956) used songbooks, a radio "News Bulletin" and advertisements in his newspaper to promote his products. One such newspaper advertisement promoted the "easy, pleasant way of taking that great food tonic – cod liver oil" (Crellin, 1994). Evident in this ad is also the fact that around the 1920's, food and their nutritional products, such as vitamins, were beginning to be promoted as scientifically important to good health. In specific reference to cod liver oil, it was promoted as containing vitamin A and D and was said to contribute to helping "correct" nature's failure. For bones, teeth, and malnutrition (Crellin, 1994). The growing view of the importance of vitamins can also be seen in a local radio show on CBC from the 1950s, where radio personality "Uncle Mose" presents his view on vitamins. According to "Uncle Mose, a "nutrition expert" visited their town and was studying the vitamin intake in the residents' diet and then counseled the women on how to prepare food to enhance vitamin content, for example increasing variety and reducing cooking time (Miller, 1984). Although a fictional story, the stories of "Uncle Mose" often reflected the normal occurrences in rural Newfoundland. Linked to the need for vitamins for a good diet was the promotion by public health for a healthy diet in relation to tuberculosis. By enhancing the diet, tuberculosis was thought to be less likely (Crellin, 1994). In addition, at the time of the sanatorium, sunshine was thought to help resolve tuberculosis. Cod liver oil, which contains the "sun produced" vitamin D, was promoted as the "liquid sunshine" and gained further ground as a dietary supplement to prevent tuberculosis ("History of Tuberculosis," 2008). Tuberculosis was a major worry for Newfoundlanders in the early 1900s; 3498 people died in Newfoundland in the five year period of World War I while 1295 soldiers died over the same five-year period (House, 1981). These are but a few of the contributing factors toward the popularity of the

commercial product as there were changes in views about self-health and the benefit of commercial versus homemade that were occurring in the first part of the 20th century.

The true popularity of cod liver oil and its role in everyday life can be seen in several ways. For myself, I noticed a distinct change in the use of the oil used by my relatives in the span of two generations. My grandparents have limited memories of the use of cod liver oil, whereas my parents, aunts and uncles are all familiar with taking the oil on a regular basis. The popularity is also reflected in a popular folk song "Dear Doctor John." This song written by lyricist Johnny Burke (1851-1930) tells the story of a man who is plagued by cod liver oil and how it is keeping his "miserable" wife alive ("Cod Liver Oil Song," 2008). The song not only reflects the everyday use of the product but also the faith that people had that this oil was of such fortifying nature that it would keep the sick from death.

The uses of cod liver oil in Newfoundland vary in curing everything from night blindness to nicks and cuts. Rheumatism is a use that has been promoted since the late 1700s. Rickets is another long time use; it was further promoted in the 1920s with the emphasis on the Vitamin D content of the oil and the link of Vitamin D to bone quality (Crellin, 1994). The oil was touted for prevention of tuberculosis at different times. However, by 1910, its use for tuberculosis was promoted as a strengthener due to its vitamin and caloric content and had been incorporated into public health recommendations to enhance the diet. As a general point, the oil was used as a food supplement in Newfoundland children. My father can remember regular shipments of cod liver oil arriving at his school in the early 1950s and each child receiving a bottle to take home for regular use. Night blindness is another use that gained in reputation as more became known of the vitamin content of the oil. In this case, it was the vitamin A content of the oil that supported the use for curing night blindness. Other uses were for pneumonia, sore throat and ulcers in the stomach (Crellin, 1994).

The oil was used as a topical agent. It was thought to have some wound healing properties. Although used for cuts and minor wounds in combination with other ingredients, it was also used for eczema and as an emollient. It was even a component of a "Newfoundland fly dope" (Crellin, 1994).

### **The Widespread Use of Cod Liver Oil**

The use of cod liver oil was not limited to Newfoundland. At the turn of the century in his book, *The Principal and Practices of Medicine*, Sir William Osler (1849-1919) promoted lots of sunlight and one half a teaspoon of cod liver oil a day to children in England to help decrease the number of children developing rickets. After the First World War, the link between vitamin D and rickets and the content of vitamin D in cod liver oil further enhanced the promotion of cod liver oil to prevent rickets (Wilton, 1995).

With the introduction of multivitamins, cod liver oil has decreased in its popularity for young children but has found new life in different indications and received support for some of its past indications. The oil does indeed have the fat soluble vitamins, A and D; the average amount per 20 ml of the oil has about 15000 IU of vitamin A and 1500 U of vitamin D ("Cod Liver Oil," 2005). This supports its use for rickets and promoting eye health. There has also been evidence to support the use of fish oils with omega 3 fatty acids decreasing the clinical effects of rheumatoid arthritis, however, this involves high

doses and limiting of the omega 6 fatty acids consumed (Volker *et al.*, 2000). A recent indication for fish oil that has resulted in a revival in the popularity of cod liver oil supplements is the effect of fish oils on overall cardiovascular health. This effect is thought to come from the level of omega-3 acids contained in fish oils; on average cod liver oil contains 2.2 g per 20 ml of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and 1.8 g/20 ml of eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) ("Cod Liver Oil," 2005). In capsules, depending on the level of concentration, the amount of omega-3 can vary. For those with no documented coronary heart disease, an adequate intake of two meals of fish per week should be adequate, according to the *American Heart Association* (AHA). For those with documented coronary heart disease, 1 g of EPA and DHA combined is recommended. The AHA also recommends that those with hypertriglyceridemia may benefit from two to four grams of EPA and DHA combined (Oh, 2005). However, it must be kept in mind to monitor the vitamin A levels of supplements when using such high doses to prevent vitamin A toxicity.

## Conclusion

Despite the revolution of cod liver oil from its crude homemade form to the capsule of today, its place in Newfoundland culture has been secured in the memories of residents who used it and local folklore. Its place for the promotion of health seems to be secured with recent indications for the oil, and it seems the history of this oil will continue to evolve in Newfoundland and around the world.

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