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## The Greatest Wilderness Medicine that You can Make

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Everything you need to survive in the wilderness is provided by nature, often in quantities so vast they may appear inexhaustible.

But unless you are skilled in wilderness [survival](#) you may not know how to identify and put to use the bounty nature provides.

You may fall prey to [hunger](#), [thirst](#), injury, disease, [cold](#), or a host of other [threats](#) when everything you need to survive is close at hand and easy to obtain.

### The Key to Survival is Information

In 1535 Jacques Cartier and his men found out the hard way that a mere scrap of knowledge is often what separates the survivors from the dead. As he and his men lay sick and dying from scurvy (caused by a lack of vitamin C in the diet) in the cold winter snow of Canada, a forest full of vitamin C was readily available. When a local Native American showed them [how to make pine needle tea](#), the simple scurvy cure quickly put these men back into health and helped open a continent to European exploration.

Many people have succumbed to exposure in the wilderness when a [debris hut](#), which even a lowly squirrel knows how to construct out of

### Aspirin From a Tree

The inner bark of poplars and other trees related to willows can be used just like aspirin for fevers, as a pain reliever, and to reduce the swelling of injuries.

This poplar tree has only been growing for some 5-months but is already taller than me.

leaves and grass, would have saved them.

Countless others have died of starvation in the midst of plenty. Had they only dropped their preconceived food prejudices and were willing to consider [foraging for natural foods](#) such as insects, roots, and

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[edible bark](#) their stomachs would have been full, their health maintained, and their survival assured.

[Food](#), [clothing](#), [shelter](#), weapons, clean [water](#), [wilderness medicine](#) and all else needed for your survival is provided by the good Earth if only you open yourself to the possibilities around you.

A case in point is my recent wilderness injury and a forest full of medicine you too can put to good use if only you know how. You will no doubt recognize this wilderness medicine as its more familiar drug store counterpart. And you will immediately recognize its importance as an excellent addition to your wilderness medicine knowledge.

## Wilderness Injury

Several days ago while in the forest tracking [moose](#) I twisted an ankle. As with many injuries, spraining an ankle in civilization is often no big problem. You hobble home as best you can, perhaps see a doctor, take some medicine such as ibuprofen or aspirin to reduce pain and swelling, and rest for a few days with your ankle propped up.

But in the wilderness a sprained ankle can have devastating consequences. Miles from the nearest road and habitation, with difficult ground to negotiate, if you cannot walk you will likely be spending the night in the outdoors. If unprepared to do so, this simple injury could very well threaten your survival.

## Always Carry the Survival Essentials

This situation brings up an important point: always carry your basic [survival essentials](#). Survival Topics has a number of articles covering the important [survival gear](#) you need to always have one hand. You never know what is going to happen on your next outing and even simple injuries or errors in judgment can place you in a survival situation you must be prepared for.

Carrying a few basic items of survival gear can make the difference between a comfortable survival experience and a life threatening one. No matter where you go, even on just a short trip, always bring your survival essentials. This simple rule could very well save your life.

After spraining an ankle it would have been simple matter to open a survival kit, take out some ibuprofen or aspirin, and wash it down with a drink of [clean water](#). This would serve to reduce swelling and pain in the sprained ankle, make you more comfortable, and hopefully allow enough mobility to hobble out of the wilderness.

But what if you were in the wilderness with no medications in a [survival kit](#) for pain and swelling? Perhaps you have been injured for several days and taken your last aspirin. Or have become separated from your survival kit due to an accident such as an overturned canoe or crashed airplane.

## Natural Pain Medicine



### Wilderness Injury

In the wilderness as simple an injury as a sprained ankle can be life threatening. Here I am literally surrounded by a potent medicine that will help alleviate pain and swelling..

The natural medicine found in the inner bark of poplars and other tree species related to willow can be of great value in helping to keep you alive and comfortable.

Like Jacques Carter and his men back in 1535, in 2008 I was surrounded by an entire forest full

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### Bark Aspirin

The inner bark contains the compound related to aspirin

In the spring and early summer the bark will easily peel from trees in long sheets. At other times of the year you can scrape bark off the tree stems and branches using your [survival knife](#).

of medicine tailor made for my situation. All I needed was one small piece of knowledge in order to use it. And once again it is a tree that provides the potent natural medicine I was in need of: the aspen, otherwise known as "poplar".

### Bark and Aspirin

Since ancient times certain tree barks have been well known for their properties of reducing fever, pain, and inflammation. A special ingredient contained in these barks is one of the most potent pain killers in nature.

Fever, muscle aches, osteoarthritis, headache, menstrual cramps, arthritis and inflammations including bursitis, tendonitis, and traumas such as a sprain can all be treated with a dose of natural salicin made from the bark of these trees

In the 1800's scientists were able to extract and identify salicin as the potent pain killing medicine found in the bark of these trees, and then went on to develop and market a synthetic version called acetylsalicylic acid which we have come to know as "Aspirin".

The most commonly used medicine in the world is aspirin. In fact, every year throughout the world some 90 million pounds (40 million kilograms) of aspirin are taken. Even though most of us now use the synthetic version of salicin for our aches and pains, the potent pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory medicine contained in tree bark is no less valuable.

In a wilderness survival setting, knowing how to harvest and use the salicin in tree bark is the most valuable natural medicine knowledge you can have.

### Trees that Contain Salicin

Salicin concentrates in the inner bark of trees and shrubs related to willows which include:

- Populus tremuloides: Quaking, Trembling or American Aspen (northern & western North America)
- Populus grandidentata: Bigtooth Aspen (eastern North America, south of P. tremuloides)
- white willow/European willow ( Salix alba )
- black willow/pussy willow ( Salix nigra )
- crack willow ( Salix fragilis )
- purple willow ( Salix purpurea )
- weeping willow ( Salix babylonica )

### How to Make Bark Aspirin

In the picture you can see me sitting on rock massaging my sprained ankle. And right in front of me is the best natural medicine for pain and swelling you can find in the wilderness: the inner bark of a poplar tree.

The poplar trees growing in this recently logged over area are less than a year old. Poplars are a pioneer species of trees. In disturbed areas they are often the first and fastest trees to grow and can rise to a height of ten feet or more in one season. In the picture you can see me standing next to one of these young trees. Note the very large leaves that grow directly from the main stem of the plant. As the tree

increases in size this stem will form a multiplicity of branches on which the leaves will be much smaller.

The salicin you are looking for is contained in the inner bark of the tree, also known as the cambium layer. The inner bark is the actual living tissue of the plant and is located between the rough outer bark and the hard wood.

During the spring and early summer it is an easy matter to peel the bark from trees, as we did in the Survival Topic on [edible pine bark](#), and either chew it directly or steep it in hot water to make a tea. Simply cut into the bark and strip it off; since the interface between the bark of the tree and its woody portion is very slippery, you can peel the bark off in long continuous strips.

At other times of the year you cannot peel the bark from trees so easily. In this case it is a simple matter to scrape off both the inner and outer bark using the sharp edge of a knife. In the picture I am using my survival knife to scrape the bark off onto a tree stump.

The smell and taste of poplar bark is very aspirin like and I rather enjoy its bitter taste though some people may find it a bit too much. You can chew a mouthful of bark and swallow the liquid if you are in a hurry and don't mind the taste.

An alternative is to simmer about 2 teaspoons of the inner bark in cup of water for ten minutes and let cool before straining and drinking. Three or four cups of this bark aspirin tea can be consumed daily.

I have found the young trees like those shown here to be especially potent. As with anything you harvest from nature, take only what you need and leave the rest. Do not deface a large tree by removing bark directly from its main trunk. Instead remove small branches so as to limit damage.

## Practice Wilderness Medicine

The next time you are in the forest make an effort to identify trees that are so very important for natural wilderness medicine. From [balsam fir pitch](#) to [birch chaga conks](#) and poplar aspirin tea, trees offer valuable compounds you can use to survive in the wilderness.

Once you learn how to make bark aspirin tea you may find yourself using it often while traveling through wilderness areas.

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**MLC**  
**Pennsylvania**

Once again showing that nature can provide all to the educated consumer. This article is a prime example of working with nature, not against it.

**nick**  
**ozark mtns**

Willows thrive in lowlands and along creek banks. We have used the inner bark for pain relief when scouting game and on our Knife only weeks. Aromatic cedar here also works wel to stabilize runny nose and breathing trouble.

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**Steve**  
**Wisconsin**

Good article. Always wondered how to make willow bark "aspirin" tea.

Just a thought...being a health professional, we always tell our patients to NOT use aspirin in a sprain situation. Aspirin will thin the blood and possibly cause the swelling to increase. (thin blood=more fluid "leaking" into the injury site)

Was wondering if by using a "natural" pain reliever this would be true?

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