

# Can the Use of Impepho Leaves Extend beyond Traditional to Modern Medicine? An Opinion

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## What is Impepho?

Impepho is an indigenous African herb that is well known to most South Africans, particularly in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) provinces. The term “Impepho” is what the IsiXhosa-speaking tribe from Eastern Cape call this herb, while the IsiZulu-speakers from KZN call it “Imphepho”. Other English and Afrikaans names of this herb include Everlasting, African Sage, Licorice Plant, Sewejaartjies and Kooigoed. In most local markets within the country, dried Impepho leaves can be seen on display and are readily accessible for interested buyers (Sobiecki 2022). Besides South Africa, Impepho is also well known across the African continent, Europe – particularly Portugal – and some Western countries (USDA 2022). Scientifically, the herb belongs to the genus *Helichrysum* (family *Asteraceae*) and its species include *H. cymosum*, *H. nudifolium*, *H. odoratissimum* and *H. petiolare* (Lourens, Viljoen and Van Heerden 2008). The word “helichrysum” is derived from the Greek “helios” meaning

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sun and “chrysos” meaning gold. Most of the flowers of this plant are a golden yellow colour.

## Cultural and Traditional Applications of Impepho

According to the American anthropologist James Spradley (1934–1982), “culture” is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour, while “tradition”, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, refers to cultural continuity. Both culturally and traditionally, Impepho is widely used in South Africa as a ritual incense to invoke the ancestral spirits, cleanse negative energy, and calm the evil spirits. Moreover, some traditional scholars attribute the calming effects of Impepho to that of frankincense, the resin obtained from trees of the genus *Boswellia* that has been used since antiquity in various Christian religious ceremonies (Howard 2018; Sobiecki 2022). In addition, most *muthis* (local medicines) are prepared with plants such as Impepho and others growing near rivers, in water or on mountains (Howard 2018). Consequently, this herb is also commonly referred to as a “holy plant” in African spirituality, because it is believed to invite the presence of the “good spirits, clarify dreams and bring fortunes” (Mkhulu 2019, n.p.).

## Is There a Potential Transitioning on the Use of Impepho from Traditional to Modern Medicine?

Evidence suggests that Impepho was one of the first medicines revealed to traditional healers. Since they started using this herb as a traditional medicine, it led them to learn and use other medicinal herbs (Howard 2018). The African traditional healthcare system relies heavily on the use of medicinal plants, making it one of the oldest and most diverse therapeutic approaches (Bhuda and Marumo 2020). Traditionally trained healers in rural Africa often prescribe medicinal plants as the most readily available and least expensive health resource for the community, and in some cases they are the only therapy available (Mahomoodally 2013). These traditional healers have found Impepho to be an effective remedy for medical health conditions, like tuberculosis (TB), HIV, coughs, colds, fevers, headaches, and liver and kidney cleansing, when drunk as a liquid tea or through steaming. Impepho is also reported to stop vomiting as well as help persons who are anxious or require assistance with falling asleep. There are also claims that Impepho has antiseptic, antiviral, antifungal, antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and pain-relieving properties based on perceived effectiveness from rural residents and traditional healers (Howard 2018). Unfortunately, traditional and scientific knowledge about Impepho’s efficacy differ greatly. Impepho’s therapeutic potential has been studied over the past decades, but only the most recent evidence is a review of previous studies (Akinyede et al. 2021; Lourens, Viljoen and Van Heerden 2008). These studies affirm that there is some level of therapeutic effectiveness of this herb and suggest further research be conducted on the herb as a modern cost-effective medical therapeutic substance in drug development (Akinyede et al. 2021; Lourens, Viljoen and Van Heerden 2008; Sobiecki 2014; 2022).

## Future Directions

Despite documented uses for healing by traditional healers, especially in Africa, the healing abilities and mechanisms of Impepho remain under-studied by science and medicine for modern drug development. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers worldwide were re-evaluating the importance of caring for themselves. These “mind, body, and soul” lifestyle values focus on natural ways to improve individuals’ overall wellness, including protecting the immune system against viruses, and to help them recover faster if they get sick. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated consumer introspection around health and wellness for reasons not considered before and has since fast-tracked botanical/herbal/plant-derived medicine as an effective, non-synthetic alternative. As such, modern medicine needs to learn from traditional medicine starting with the health treatment benefits of Impepho. There is a disconnection between medical scholars and traditional healers on how adequately and jointly to use this herb. We therefore urge researchers to work with traditional healers and medical professionals in South Africa and other African countries to carry out additional scientific studies on the Impepho herb.

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