

Aloe Vera

This fact sheet provides basic information about aloe vera—common names, uses, potential side effects, and resources for more information. Aloe vera’s use can be traced back 6,000 years to early Egyptian civilization, where the plant was depicted on stone carvings. Known as the “plant of immortality,” aloe was presented as a burial gift to deceased pharaohs.

Common Names—aloe vera, aloe, burn plant, lily of the desert, elephant’s gall

Latin Names—*Aloe vera*, *Aloe barbadensis*

What It Is Used For

- Traditionally, aloe was used topically to heal wounds and for various skin conditions, and orally as a laxative.
- Today, in addition to traditional uses, people take aloe orally to treat a variety of conditions, including diabetes, asthma, epilepsy, and osteoarthritis. People use aloe topically for osteoarthritis, burns, and sunburns.
- Aloe vera gel can be found in hundreds of skin products, including lotions and sunblocks.
- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved aloe vera as a natural food flavoring.

How It Is Used

- Aloe leaves contain a clear gel that is often used as a topical ointment.
- The green part of the leaf that surrounds the gel can be used to produce a juice or a dried substance (called latex) that is taken by mouth.

What the Science Says

- Aloe latex contains strong laxative compounds. Products made with various components of aloe (aloin, aloe-emodin, and barbaloin) were at one time regulated by the FDA as oral over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives. In 2002, the FDA required that all OTC aloe laxative products be removed from the U.S. market or reformulated because the companies that manufactured them did not provide the necessary safety data.
- Early studies show that topical aloe gel may help heal burns and abrasions. One study, however, showed that aloe gel inhibits healing of deep surgical wounds. Aloe gel does not prevent burns from radiation therapy.
- There is not enough scientific evidence to support aloe vera for any of its other uses.

Side Effects and Cautions

- Use of topical aloe vera is not associated with significant side effects.
- Abdominal cramps and diarrhea have been reported with oral use of aloe vera.
- Diarrhea, caused by the laxative effect of oral aloe vera, can decrease the absorption of many drugs.
- People with diabetes who use glucose-lowering medication should be cautious if also taking aloe by mouth because preliminary studies suggest aloe may lower blood glucose levels.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

Sources

Aloe. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at <http://www.naturaldatabase.com> on November 20, 2006.

Aloe (*Aloe vera*). Natural Standard Database Web site. Accessed at <http://www.naturalstandard.com> on November 20, 2006.

For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view:

- *What's in the Bottle? An Introduction to Dietary Supplements* at nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/
- *Herbal Supplements: Consider Safety, Too* at nccam.nih.gov/health/supplement-safety/

NCCAM Clearinghouse

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TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

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NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

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