



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Willow Bark

This information describes the common uses of Willow Bark, how it works, and its possible side effects.

Tell your healthcare providers about any dietary supplements you're taking, such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, and natural or home remedies. This will help them manage your care and keep you safe.

What is it?

Willow bark may help relieve muscle and joint pain, but may have side effects similar to aspirin.

Willow bark is commonly used to treat pain and reduce fevers. It contains a compound called salicin that has been shown to have anti-inflammatory effects. Several studies suggest willow bark extracts can help reduce back pain and osteoarthritis.

Although aspirin is developed from salicin, a direct comparison between aspirin benefits and willow bark benefits cannot be made. At the same time, aspirin-like side effects may occur with willow bark.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- **To reduce fever**

Willow bark is thought to act in a similar way as aspirin, but clinical trials have not been performed.

- **To treat pain, including muscle and joint pain**

Clinical trials suggest willow bark extract is effective in treating low back pain. Other study results are mixed for osteoarthritis pain.

- **To aid in weight loss**

There are no studies to indicate that willow bark can aid in weight loss. A case of allergic reaction was reported following use of a weight-loss product that contained willow bark.

What are the side effects?

- Stomach or intestinal discomfort, allergic reaction, sudden rash, or itching
- **Salicin** in willow bark may affect blood clotting. The clinical significance in patients with impaired platelet functioning is yet to be determined.

Case reports

- **Serious allergic reaction:** In a 25-year-old woman with a history of aspirin allergy who used a supplement promoted for weight loss that contained willow bark.
- **Acute breathing distress:** In a 61-year-old woman who suddenly became short of breath and coughed repeatedly after taking willow bark.
- **Fatal liver failure:** In a 28-month-old boy after being treated for upper respiratory infection with acetaminophen and a tea containing willow bark.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Due to possible bleeding complications, willow bark should be discontinued before surgery or chemotherapy.
- Children should not be given willow bark because of the potential for developing Reye syndrome, a serious condition associated with the use of aspirin

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking **warfarin or other blood thinners**: Willow bark may increase the risk of bleeding.
- You are taking **non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**: Willow bark may increase the risk of stomach and intestinal damage and bleeding.
- You have sensitivity to **aspirin or aspirin-containing products**.
- You have **asthma, breathing problems, chest tightness, or throat tightness**.
- You have **stomach problems or an ulcer**.
- You are having **skin rash, hives, or itchy / swollen skin**.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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