



Living With Liver Disease

Complementary Therapies

When we get sick, we want to get well quickly. Some of us turn to our doctor first, while others may try home remedies or alternative medicine. Many of us do both, which is known as complementary therapy.

Complementary therapies are those that are used along with conventional Western medicine. They can be classified as nutritional (special diets, herbs, supplements), psychological, (meditation), physical (massage) or a combination of these (yoga).

If you have liver disease, you may consider taking a nutritional herb or supplement to help the liver. But remember, everything passes through the liver and just because an herb or supplement may be natural, it isn't necessarily safe.

Before taking herbs or supplements, you should assess your overall health. Adopting healthy habits will provide far more benefits than herbal remedies or supplements can. If you smoke, drink alcohol or have other potentially unhealthy habits, do not expect an herbal remedy to offset the potential damage these habits can cause.

If you are on medications to manage or treat your hepatitis, or if you have decompensated cirrhosis, do not take herbs or supplements unless recommended by your doctor. Some supplements may prolong bleeding times or interfere with anesthetics. Stop the use of all supplements at least a week prior to any surgery or procedure that uses anesthesia. Inform your medical team and anesthesiologist about any herbs or supplements you are taking.

If you are interested in herbs or supplements, here are tips for safer use:

- Talk to your doctor before taking herbs or supplements.
- Do your research and apply the same commonsense approach and standards to herbs and supplements as you would any medication.
- Before you take an herb or supplement, find out if it is compatible with other medication or

supplements you are taking and not contraindicated for any other condition you may have.

- Be skeptical. Claims made by the product manufacturer or seller may differ from independent research. Despite claims to the contrary, there is no natural remedy to cure hepatitis. There may be remedies that improve symptoms associated with liver disease, but none has permanently eradicated the virus.
- More is not better; do not exceed the recommended dose.
- Supplements may be contaminated, so know your source. In rare cases, people have suffered liver damage as a consequence of taking contaminated substances.
- Choose supplements that are standardized. Buy products that submit to voluntary self-regulation.
- Do not rely on health store staff for medical information. Although they may be helpful, remember that salespeople are usually not licensed to practice medicine.
- Do not be swayed by personal testimonies. Let medical advice and evidence guide your decision to use herbs and supplements.
- Report any suspected adverse reactions to an herb or supplement to the FDA's monitoring program, [Medwatch](#).

Milk Thistle

Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), a plant from the aster family, is a common ingredient in supplement blends that promote liver health. Silymarin is the active ingredient in milk thistle that is likely responsible for its medicinal qualities. As with all herbs and supplement, talk to your medical provider before taking milk thistle. Things to keep in mind about milk thistle:

- It's difficult to know how beneficial milk thistle is to those with liver disease as study results have been conflicting or of poor quality.
- Milk thistle is usually well tolerated and has not been shown to harm the liver, except in people who have hemochromatosis. Those with a history of hormone-related cancers, including breast and uterine cancer and prostate cancer, may need to avoid milk thistle. Milk thistle should not be used by pregnant or breastfeeding women. It can also lower blood sugar, so people with diabetes should use with caution.

- Milk thistle can cause side effects, such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, itchiness and headaches.
- Milk thistle can cause an allergic reaction, which can be life threatening. People who are allergic to ragweed, daisies, marigolds and similar plants should use with caution.

The following herbs may be harmful to the liver, so before taking these or any herbs or dietary supplements, talk to your health care provider:

- Artemesia
- Atractylis gummifera
- Bush tea
- Callilepis laureola
- Chapparal leaf (creosote bush, greasewood)
- Comfrey (*Symphytum officinale*)
- Crotalaria
- Germander
- Gordolobo herbal tea
- Heliotropium
- Jin-Bu-Huang
- Kava (*Piper methysticum*)
- Kombucha mushroom (tea)
- Ma-Huang (*Ephedra sinica*)
- Margosa oil
- Mate (Paraguay) tea
- Mistletoe
- Nutmeg (if taken in large doses)
- Pennyroyal (squawmint oil)
- Tansy Ragwort (variation of Ragwort)
- Sassafras
- Senecio aureus
- Senna

- Skullcap
- Symphytum
- Valerian Root

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