

Patient Fact Sheet

GARLIC

GARLIC (*Allium sativum*) has been used for thousands of years as a medicine as well as a food. It may simply be eaten, but garlic products are also available in other forms, including pills, capsules, and oil extracts. Garlic's active ingredients are several sulfur-containing compounds, including *alliin* and *allicin*.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

Garlic has been used for many kinds of medical problems. It is most often recommended:

- ◆ To lower cholesterol and blood pressure,
- ◆ To prevent blood clots,
- ◆ To fight many kinds of infections, including colds. Garlic-oil ear drops are sometimes used for ear infections, and garlic products are used on the skin for fungal infections.
- ◆ To prevent cancer.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

- ◆ Garlic can lower blood **cholesterol** and may improve the ratio of HDL ("good cholesterol") to LDL ("bad cholesterol"). In studies where patients took 600-900 mg per day of standardized garlic powder supplements, the average decrease in cholesterol was 10%.
- ◆ Garlic supplements can also decrease **blood pressure**, by 5-7%.
- ◆ Garlic may be a mild blood thinner, preventing **blood clots**.
- ◆ Substances in garlic fight many kinds of bacteria and viruses in test tubes, but there are no studies in humans showing that garlic helps fight bacterial or viral **infections**.
- ◆ In one small study, a cream containing the garlic ingredient *ajoene* was effective against **athlete's foot**, a fungal infection. There are no studies comparing garlic to other medications for fungal infections.
- ◆ People who eat diets rich in garlic have a lower risk of several kinds of **cancer** than people who do not eat garlic. There are no studies showing that garlic can help when someone already has cancer.

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WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

- ◆ People who eat large amounts of garlic may have a strong smell to their breath and skin.
- ◆ Garlic may also cause heartburn, upset stomach, diarrhea, low blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, headache, trouble sleeping, or dizziness.
- ◆ Allergic reactions, including itching and hives, are possible.
- ◆ Garlic can cause skin burns if it is left on the skin for several hours.

No long-term problems have been found from taking garlic.

WILL IT INTERFERE WITH MY OTHER MEDICATIONS OR MY MEDICAL CONDITION?

- ◆ Because garlic may keep the blood from clotting, people who take herbs or medications (including aspirin) that thin the blood should ask their health care provider if it is safe for them to take garlic supplements.
- ◆ For the same reason, people who are expecting to have surgery should not take garlic supplements for a few days beforehand.
- ◆ People who take Coumadin (a medicine to prevent blood clots) should have extra tests for a while after they start or stop garlic supplements.
- ◆ Garlic may lower blood pressure, so people who already have low blood pressure, or who take medicine to lower their blood pressure, should be careful if they take garlic supplements.
- ◆ Garlic may lower blood sugars in diabetics, so diabetics may need extra testing if they start garlic supplements.
- ◆ People with stomach irritation may find that garlic makes it worse.
- ◆ Some herbalists recommend that garlic should not be taken by people with organ transplants or autoimmune disorders like rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, but there are no studies showing that it is dangerous.

IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

- ◆ When it is taken in the amounts that are used as food, garlic is safe for pregnant women, but high doses may cause contractions.
- ◆ It is safe for children in the amounts that are used as food, but there are no studies to show whether high doses are safe for children.
- ◆ Nursing babies seem to like the taste of garlic in their mothers' milk, and spend more time nursing when their mothers have eaten garlic.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

Typical doses for adults are:

- ◆ Fresh garlic: 1-6 cloves daily
- ◆ Pills or capsules: 200-300 mg three times daily
- ◆ Oil extract of garlic: 1-2 capsules daily

Doses for children are unknown.

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Fresh garlic and garlic powder are the most effective forms. Aged garlic products may cause less stomach irritation than fresh products. Oil extracts are not as effective as other forms of garlic, at least for cholesterol and blood pressure.

Garlic powder, pills, and capsules may be standardized (guaranteed) to contain 0.5 to 1.3% alliin.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Always tell your doctor or nurse practitioner if you are taking any herbal product, and before starting any new one. Your health care provider needs to know everything you are taking to help you make decisions about your health care. Some herbs can cause problems with other herbs, dietary supplements, or medications.

SEE ALSO:

Complete Monograph: <http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/garlic/garlic.pdf>

Clinician Information Summary: <http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/garlic/garlic.cis.pdf>

OnHealth.com: <http://onhealth.com/ch1/resource/herbs/item,16000.asp>

Information about garlic's use against cancer from the University of Texas Center for Alternative Medicine Research: <http://www.sph.uth.tmc.edu/utcam/summary/garlic.htm>