

Patient Fact Sheet

WHITE WILLOW BARK

WHITE WILLOW BARK comes from the white willow tree (*Salix alba*) which grows in North America, Asia, and Europe. Sometimes bark from other kinds of willow is used also. It is available as dried bark to make tea, and in tinctures (in alcohol), glycerites (in glycerine), and capsules. The main active ingredients are *salicin* and *salicortin*, which are similar to aspirin.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

Willow bark is traditionally used to treat many kinds of pain, including arthritis, headache, backache, toothache, and menstrual cramps. Since aspirin became available in the 1890's, willow bark has been used much less. Some herbalists also recommend willow bark as a mild blood thinner to prevent heart attacks and strokes.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

- ◆ There have been very few studies of willow bark's effects. Salicin can decrease pain. However, the amount of salicin in willow bark is so small that it would take several quarts of tea to equal a daily dose of aspirin.
- ◆ Unlike aspirin, salicin does not thin the blood, so it is not likely to help prevent heart attacks or strokes.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Side effects are rare, but may include:

- ◆ Allergic reaction, including itching or hives.
- ◆ Upset stomach.

No long-term problems have been found from willow bark, but it contains chemicals called tannins, which can cause liver and kidney damage with long-term use.

IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

There are no studies of willow bark's safety for children or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. It is traditionally not used during pregnancy.

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

- ◆ Like aspirin, willow bark is not safe for children with the flu or chickenpox, because it could cause Reye's syndrome.
- ◆ People who are allergic to aspirin should not take willow bark.
- ◆ It is not recommended for people with bleeding problems, liver or kidney problems, ulcers, asthma, or diabetes.
- ◆ People who are taking aspirin or other NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) like ibuprofen should not take willow bark as well.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

- ◆ Willow bark tea is made from 1/2 to 2 tsp. of bark per cup of water, boiled together for five minutes. Three to five cups per day is the usual dose for adults.
- ◆ Doses of the tincture, glycerite, and capsules vary. Consult your doctor or nurse practitioner.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- ◆ Willow bark tea is very bitter.
- ◆ Always tell your doctor or nurse practitioner if you are taking any herb, and before starting any new herb. Your health care provider needs to know everything you are taking to help you make decisions about your health care. Herbs can cause problems with other herbs, dietary supplements, or medications.
- ◆ Herbal products may contain chemicals or other species of plants.