

The Longwood Herbal Task Force
(<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/default.htm>) and
The Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research
(<http://www.childrenshospital.org/holistic/>)

Clinician Information Summary

BLESSED THISTLE

(*Cnicus benedictus*)

SUMMARY

Although blessed thistle is traditionally used as a “bitter” tonic to enhance appetite and digestion, there are remarkably few clinical trials evaluating these effects. It is sometimes included in the herbal cancer remedy, Essiac. No controlled trials have documented clinical benefits in humans. The only apparent side effects are allergic reactions in sensitive individuals and gastric irritation with very high dosages. Safety has not been evaluated for pregnancy, lactation or childhood.

POPULAR USES: “Bitter”, used to stimulate appetite, enhance bile flow, and treat dyspepsia and flatulence. Sometimes added to the herbal cancer remedy, Essiac.

CHEMICAL CONSTITUENTS: Cnicin (a sesquiterpene lactone glycoside), lignans, triterpenoids, flavonoids, essential oil, mucilage, tannins.

SCIENTIFIC DATA

In vitro: Cnicin and the essential oil have mild antibacterial *in vitro* against *B. subtilis*, *Brucella* species, *E. coli*, *Proteus* species, *P. aeruginosa*, *S. aureus* and *S. faecalis*. Lignans found in blessed thistle and other plants also exhibit activity against HIV-1.

In animals: In the standard rat paw model of inflammation, cnicin has anti-inflammatory effects. In mice, blessed thistle extracts and cnicin have antitumor activity against sarcoma 180 and lymphoid leukemia.

In humans: No controlled trials reported have been reported.

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TOXICITY AND SIDE EFFECTS

Side effects: Allergic reactions have been reported, but are uncommon. In high doses (>5 grams per cup of tea) gastric irritation and vomiting have been reported. In mice, the LD50 of cynicin was 1.6 –3.2 mmol/kg body weight.

Interactions with other medications: Unknown

Contraindications: Patients with gastric ulcer or gastrointestinal irritation should avoid blessed thistle because it may stimulate gastric acid secretion and be an intestinal irritant.

Pregnancy: Due to its traditional uses as an emmenagogue and abortifacient, it is not used during pregnancy.

Lactation: No clinical studies

Pediatric use: It is not traditionally used in infancy or early childhood. There are no clinical studies or systematic surveillance.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *PDR for Herbal Medicine*, 1st Ed., Medical Economics Company, 1998 p. 630-633
- Newall C., Anderson L., Phillipson JD. *Herbal Medicine: A guide for Health Care Professionals*, The Pharmaceutical Press, 1996, p 25-26
- HOME: <http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/default.htm>
- Blessed Thistle Complete Monograph:
<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/blessedthistle/blessedthistle.pdf>
- Blessed Thistle Patient Fact Sheet:
<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/blessedthistle/blessedthistle.ph.pdf>