

Patient Fact Sheet

MILK THISTLE

MILK THISTLE (*Silybum marianum*) is related to the artichoke. The herbal medicine comes from the plant's seeds. It is available in capsules, as an alcohol tincture, or as a glycerite (concentrated in glycerine). The main biochemical ingredient is a group of compounds called *silymarin*.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

Milk thistle is commonly used to:

- ◆ Help the liver work better in people with liver problems.
- ◆ Protect the liver and kidneys from damage from some drugs and chemicals.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

Some studies have shown that ingredients in milk thistle can:

- ◆ Improve liver function in people with cirrhosis and hepatitis.
- ◆ Prevent or minimize damage to the liver and kidneys from some drugs, including some drugs for cancer and mental problems.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Side effects are rare, but may include:

- ◆ Diarrhea or upset stomach, especially for the first few days.
- ◆ Allergic reaction, including itching or hives.
- ◆ Decreased blood sugar in diabetics.

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

- ◆ Diabetics should consult their health care provider and monitor their blood sugars, since milk thistle may change the dosage of medication they need.
- ◆ Tinctures are not recommended for people with severe liver disease, alcoholics, children, or pregnant women because they contain alcohol.

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IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

There are no studies of milk thistle's use for children or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. No problems have been reported.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

- ◆ A typical adult dose of milk thistle extract is 100 to 200 milligrams, three times a day by mouth.
- ◆ Doses for children are unknown.
- ◆ Standardized extracts of milk thistle are available. They are guaranteed to contain a certain amount of active ingredients. Usually these products contain 70-80% silymarin.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- ◆ 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.

SEE ALSO:

Milk Thistle Complete Monograph: <http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/milkthistle/milkthistle.pdf>

Milk Thistle Clinician Information Summary:

<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/milkthistle/milkthistle.cis.pdf>