

Patient Fact Sheet

RHUBARB

MEDICINAL RHUBARB (*Rheum officinale* or *Rheum palmatum*, also known as Turkey Rhubarb) is related to the garden rhubarb used for food, but it has much more of the active ingredients. The herbal medicine comes from the roots of the plant. It is available in tablets, tinctures (in alcohol), and as the dried, powdered root.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

- ◆ Rhubarb is used as a laxative (to cause bowel movements).
- ◆ In China it is used for stomach ulcers and chronic kidney failure.
- ◆ It is also part of the alternative cancer remedy, Essiac.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

- ◆ Rhubarb is a strong laxative.
- ◆ Studies in China have shown that it may help heal ulcers and prevent chronic kidney failure from getting worse.
- ◆ There are no studies of rhubarb's use for cancer or AIDS.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Side effects may include:

- ◆ Allergic reaction, including itching or hives.
- ◆ Diarrhea and stomach cramps.
- ◆ Kidney stones, especially with long-term use.
- ◆ Low potassium (a mineral) in the blood.
- ◆ Need for laxatives to have regular bowel movements.

IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

Rhubarb is not considered safe for children less than 12 years old, or women who are pregnant or breastfeeding.

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

- ◆ Rhubarb is not recommended for people with intestinal blockage or inflammation.
- ◆ It is not recommended for people who have had kidney stones.

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- ◆ People who take digoxin (Lanoxin) and some other heart medicines should be careful when taking rhubarb, because it can lower the potassium level and make these medicines more dangerous.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

- ◆ A typical laxative dose for an adult is one teaspoon of powdered root, boiled in one cup of water for ten minutes, then taken one tablespoon at a time, up to one cup per day.
- ◆ Doses for other problems vary, and the doses used in the Chinese studies were unclear.
- ◆ Follow your health care provider's instructions.

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. This is especially a concern with rhubarb because it is grown in developing countries.
- ◆ Rhubarb should not be used as a laxative, or in doses that cause increased bowel movements, for longer than ten days. This is because it can lower the potassium level or cause a need for laxatives all the time.