

PERFORMANCE ENHANCERS FACTS AND BOTTOM LINE

COMFREY

What is it?

For centuries, the roots and leaves of the comfrey plant have been used for their healing properties. Historically comfrey was felt to help heal broken bones and wounds - this explains its derivation from the Latin word "conferre" meaning to bring together. There are several different species of comfrey and two of them contain compounds known as unsaturated pyrrolizidine alkaloids (UPAs) that have been shown to cause liver damage. One of these dangerous alkaloids is echimidine and it is found in both Prickly comfrey and Russian comfrey. While some comfrey products do not contain harmful UPAs, not all manufacturers identify the species of comfrey in their products and until this changes Health Canada has advised Canadians to avoid using all of these products.

DOES COMFREY HAVE OTHER NAMES?

Yes - comfrey is known by a wide variety of different names, including: Ass Ear, Common comfrey, Russian comfrey, Prickly comfrey, Black Root, Blackwort, Boneset, Bruisewort, Consolida, Consolidae Radix, Symphytum Radix, Consound, Gum Plant, Healing Herb, Knitback, Knitbone, Salsify, Slippery Root, Wallwort, Yalluc, Symphytum officinale, Symphytum asperimum (prickly comfrey) and Symphytum uplandicum (Russian comfrey)

WHAT IS COMFREY USED FOR?

Comfrey has historically been used for the treatment of a wide variety of medical problems such as: digestive problems, lung problems, arthritis, ulcers, bruises, wounds, strains/sprains, burns gum disease, sore throats, hemorrhoids, varicose veins, chest colds, athlete's foot, cuts, abscesses, excessive menstrual bleeding, cancer, angina and fractures.

WHAT TYPE OF PRODUCTS CONTAIN COMFREY?

Comfrey is found in many products including herbal teas, skin creams, pills, capsules, liquids, lip balms, burn salves, mouth wash and diaper rash ointments.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT COMFREY WORKS?

While Comfrey has been used for centuries to treat a multitude of problems, research to date supports that at best it may be effective as a topical anti-inflammatory. There is insufficient evidence to support its use in the treatment of most of the medical problems that it is currently recommended for.

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ARE THERE ANY SIDE EFFECTS FROM COMFREY USE?

There are several international reports of liver damage occurring with consuming teas, capsules and leaves that contain comfrey. To date, no cases of liver injury have been reported in Canada.

You should see your health care provider if you experience any of the following symptoms after taking or applying a product that contains comfrey: nausea, vomiting, unusual tiredness, weakness, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, abdominal swelling, itchiness, diarrhea, jaundice (yellowing of your skin or the whites of your eyes), brown urine, clay colored bowel movements or blue spider-like veins on your abdomen. It is not known whether comfrey presents a danger to your baby if used during pregnancy or while breast-feeding. Interactions between comfrey and other prescription or over-the-counter medications have not been reported.

HOW SHOULD COMFREY BE USED?

Health Canada has advised Canadians not to ingest any health product that contains comfrey because of the risk that these products might contain liver damaging UPAs. Canadians should restrict themselves to using comfrey only when it is included in a skin product (cream, ointment, salves, etc) and that these products should not be used over broken skin (cuts, scratches, abrasions).

THE BOTTOM LINE!

Not all comfrey-containing products have been shown to be potentially dangerous but until Canadian's can be assured that the products they are ingesting are not derived from prickly or Russian comfrey, they should follow the recommendations of Health Canada.

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