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Capsaicin is the chemical in chili or cayenne peppers that makes them spicy. It has been used in traditional medicine to help with joint and muscle pain.

Capsaicin is added to skin creams, gels, ointments, lotions, and comes as a prescription-strength pain patch for relieving muscle pain. It is also added to nasal sprays to relieve chronic sneezing or a congested, runny nose.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

Capsaicin is used to:

- Relieve pain caused by arthritis
- Reduce nerve pain
- Help with pain caused by strained or sprained muscle
- Relieve itching
- Treat psoriasis (skin disease that causes red, itchy scaly patches that mostly appear on your scalp, elbows, knees, and lower back)
- Relieve headache

Capsaicin also has other uses that haven't been studied by doctors to see if they work.

It's generally safe to eat foods with capsaicin, such as chili or cayenne peppers, but talk with your healthcare providers before taking capsaicin supplements. Herbal supplements are stronger than the herbs you would use in cooking. They can also interact with some medications and affect how they work. For more information, read the "What else do I need to know?" section below.

What are the side effects?

Side effects of using capsaicin on your skin may include:

- Burning
- Redness
- Swelling
- Dryness
- Soreness
- Itching
- Cough
- Runny eyes and nose when using nasal spray with capsaicin

What else do I need to know?

- Wear gloves before applying capsaicin gels, creams, ointments, or lotions on your skin. After applying, wash your hands with soap and water so you don't get it into your eyes or other sensitive areas of your body.
- If you're using capsaicin for arthritis in your hands, follow the instructions on the label for how long you should leave it on.
- Don't use capsaicin when your skin is irritated, infected, or when you have a wound.
- Talk to your healthcare provider before using capsaicin if you have high blood pressure, heart conditions, or blood vessel problems in the brain. Capsaicin may make these conditions worse.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Capsaicin - Last updated on March 16, 2023



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