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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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What is it?

Hoxsey Herbal Therapy is not a cancer cure and some of its components may be dangerous.

Hoxsey herbal tonic was developed by Harry Hoxsey's great grandfather after his horse was cured of a leg tumor by eating wild herbs. Hoxsey combined these herbs with home cancer remedies popular at the time to create a tonic taken by mouth, as well as a preparation for topical application. Hoxsey's remedies were promoted through the first half of the 20th century, but eventually the U.S. government forced him to stop selling medicines without a medical license.

According to Hoxsey, the tonic stimulates detoxification of the body while normalizing cell metabolism. However there is no proof for this. His tonic has never been tested in the lab, in animals, or in humans, and there is no evidence to support the claim that it has anticancer effects in the human body. Hoxsey also claimed that his topical medicine would selectively kill cancer cells, but the caustic ingredients in the ointment are known to burn healthy tissue as well.

The American Cancer Society strongly urges cancer patients not to use the Hoxsey treatment.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat cancer

No scientific evidence supports this use. Although some researchers have attempted to follow patients who used Hoxsey herbal therapy at clinics in Mexico, studies could not be conducted as the record keeping was poor.

What are the side effects?

- The topical paste and powder have caused severe burns, scars, and disfigurement.
- High levels of iodine from the potassium iodide can cause pimples, excessive secretion of the eyes or nose, impotence, and inflammation of salivary glands.
- Buckthorn, one of the ingredients in the herbal tonic, is a violent laxative, and can cause abdominal pain, dehydration, anxiety, decreased respiration, diarrhea, nausea, trembling, and vomiting.
- [Cascara](#), one of the ingredients in the herbal tonic, is a laxative and can cause abdominal pain, cramping, diarrhea, discoloration of urine, fluid and electrolyte imbalance, softening of the bones, fat in the feces, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and vomiting.
- [Licorice](#), one of the ingredients in the herbal tonic, can interact with the body's hormones and lead to imbalances in water, sodium, and potassium retention. High blood pressure, fatigue, muscle pain, irregular heartbeat, low blood levels of potassium, and decreased libido can result.
- [Pokeweed](#), one of the ingredients in the herbal tonic, causes nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. Ingestion has been associated with illnesses requiring hospitalization, and has caused deaths in children.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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

Hoxsey Herbal Therapy - Last updated on February 19, 2021

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