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[Back](#)

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[Refer a Patient](#)

[Refer a Patient](#)

[Refer a Patient](#)

ABOUT US

[Our mission, vision & core values](#)

[Leadership](#)

[History](#)

[Equality, diversity & inclusion](#)

[Annual report](#)

[Give to MSK](#)

Willow bark may help relieve muscle and joint pain, but may have side effects similar to aspirin.

Willow bark is commonly used to treat pain and reduce fevers. It contains a compound called salicin that has been shown to have anti-inflammatory effects. Several studies suggest willow bark extracts can help reduce back pain and osteoarthritis.

Although aspirin is developed from salicin, a direct comparison between aspirin benefits and willow bark benefits cannot be made. At the same time, aspirin-like side effects may occur with willow bark.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To reduce fever

Willow bark is thought to act in a similar way as aspirin, but clinical trials have not been performed.

- To treat pain, including muscle and joint pain

Clinical trials suggest willow bark extract is effective in treating low back pain. Other study results are

mixed for osteoarthritis pain.

- To aid in weight loss

There are no studies to indicate that willow bark can aid in weight loss. A case of allergic reaction was reported following use of a weight-loss product that contained willow bark.

What are the side effects?

- Stomach or intestinal discomfort, allergic reaction, sudden rash, or itching
- Salicin in willow bark may affect blood clotting. The clinical significance in patients with impaired platelet functioning is yet to be determined.

Case reports

- Serious allergic reaction: In a 25-year-old woman with a history of aspirin allergy who used a supplement promoted for weight loss that contained willow bark.
- Acute breathing distress: In a 61-year-old woman who suddenly became short of breath and coughed repeatedly after taking willow bark.
- Fatal liver failure: In a 28-month-old boy after being treated for upper respiratory infection with acetaminophen and a tea containing willow bark.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Due to possible bleeding complications, willow bark should be discontinued before surgery or chemotherapy.
- Children should not be given willow bark because of the potential for developing Reye syndrome, a serious condition associated with the use of aspirin

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking warfarin or other blood thinners : Willow bark may increase the risk of bleeding.
- You are taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): Willow bark may increase the risk of stomach and intestinal damage and bleeding.
- You have sensitivity to aspirin or aspirin-containing products.
- You have asthma, breathing problems, chest tightness, or throat tightness.
- You have stomach problems or an ulcer.

- You are having skin rash, hives, or itchy / swollen skin.

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.

Willow Bark - Last updated on December 17, 2021

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