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Memorial Sloan Kettering  
Cancer Center

[Make an Appointment](#)  
[Back](#)

[Learn About Cancer & Treatment](#)  
[Search About Plans](#)

## ABOUT US

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

[Leadership](#)

[History](#)

[Inclusion & belonging](#)

[Annual report](#)

[Give to MSK](#)

FOR THE MEDIA

Essiac has not been shown to treat or prevent cancer.

Essiac was developed in the 1920s by Rene Caisse, a Canadian nurse, and promoted as an alternative cancer treatment. It contains four botanicals: [burdock root](#) , [sheep sorrel](#) , [slippery elm](#) , and [rhubarb](#) . Laboratory studies suggest Essiac has antioxidant and cytotoxic properties. However, studies on its antiproliferative effects are conflicting: Essiac prevented growth of prostate cancer cells, but stimulated growth of breast cancer cells. In a study of breast cancer patients, Essiac did not improve quality of life or mood. Despite unsubstantiated claims, Essiac remains a popular anticancer therapy.

## What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat cancer  
Laboratory studies show conflicting results. An observational study of breast cancer patients did not find any improvement in quality of life with Essiac.
- To treat HIV and AIDS

Evidence is lacking to support this claim.

- To stimulate the immune system

In laboratory studies, rhubarb, an ingredient of Essiac, suppressed activity of part of the immune system. Human studies are lacking.

- As a tonic

Evidence is lacking to support this claim.

## What are the side effects?

### Case Report

A 59-year-old woman reported symptoms of anorexia, nausea, myalgia, fatigue, and generalized abdominal pain following consumption of Essiac tea for six months. Her symptoms resolved after discontinuing the tea.

The manufacturer of Flor Essence states that users may experience increased bowel movements, frequent urination, swollen glands, skin blemishes, flu-like symptoms, or slight headaches.

## What else do I need to know?

### Do Not Take if:

- You are undergoing chemotherapy: In a case report, levels of a chemotherapy drug were increased in the blood of a patient also taking Essiac, with the potential for increased toxicity.

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](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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