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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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Bilberry is used in traditional medicine to treat eye disorders and support vision health, but clinical data for these purposes are mixed or lacking. There is insufficient evidence to support its other uses.

Compounds in bilberry called anthocyanins can regenerate rhodopsin, a pigment found in retinal cells responsible for eyesight. This is one of the reasons it has gained popularity in traditional medicine to support eye health.

In laboratory studies, bilberry reduces inflammation and fluid accumulation in tissues, acts as an antioxidant, inhibits blood clotting, and strengthens the walls of blood vessels. Bilberry extracts can inhibit the growth of cancer cells in the lab. Initial studies in humans also show that bilberry may have anti-cancer effects, relieve certain types of inflammation, or improve the biological profiles of those at higher risk for heart disease or diabetes. More clinical trials are needed to confirm these effects.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To prevent cancer
Laboratory studies and one clinical study suggest anti-cancer effects. More research is needed.
- To treat eye disorders
One small study suggests bilberry may improve visual function in some patients with normal tension glaucoma. But others produced mixed data.
- To treat circulatory disorders
Laboratory studies show that bilberry may protect blood vessels and decrease the risk of blood clots. Human data are needed.
- To treat diabetic retinopathy
Evidence is lacking to support this claim.

- To treat diarrhea
Evidence is lacking to support this claim.
- To reduce chemo-induced mucositis
Small studies have shown that formulas containing bilberry fruit help prevent chemo/radio-induced mucositis.
- To improve visual acuity
Clinical trial results are mixed on whether bilberry can help improve vision.

What are the side effects?

- A case of excessive bleeding related to long-term consumption of bilberry along with a newly prescribed blood-thinning drug has been reported.

What else do I need to know?

Do Not Take if:

- You use warfarin or other blood thinners: Bilberry may increase the risk of bleeding.
- You use aspirin or aspirin products: Bilberry may increase the risk of bleeding. Clinical relevance is not known.
- You use non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): Bilberry may increase the risk of bleeding. Clinical relevance is not known.

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.

Bilberry Fruit - Last updated on March 17, 2023



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