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What is it?

Horse chestnut may help treat chronic venous insufficiency, but its long-term effects are not known.

Horse chestnut is a seed extract. One of its active components is aescin, which may reduce inflammation and increase vein tone. It also reduces the release of enzymes that typically increase with chronic vein diseases. Other compounds in horse chestnut generally improve blood vessel tone. In some studies, horse chestnut extract was effective against chronic venous insufficiency.

A compound called aesculetin may act as an anticoagulant and blood thinner, and is therefore often excluded from over-the-counter horse chestnut products.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat circulatory disorders

Several clinical trials support the use of horse chestnut as short-term treatment for chronic venous

insufficiency, but long-term effects are unknown.

- To treat vein inflammation
No scientific evidence supports this use.
- To treat varicose veins
This claim is not backed by any evidence.
- To treat diarrhea
There is no scientific evidence to back this claim.
- To treat hemorrhoids
There are no data to support this.

What are the side effects?

Case reports

- Chestnut seed poisoning: In a 46-year-old male who mistook horse chestnut seed for Korean chestnut. Symptoms included epigastric pain, nausea, sweating, and palpitations as well as slight increases in liver enzymes, serum amylase, and pancreatic amylase.
- Intestinal obstructions: Several cases requiring surgery for removal have occurred with the excessive consumption of horse chestnuts.
- Life-threatening kidney rupture: In a patient with a benign kidney tumor, after taking horse chestnut seed extract for venous insufficiency.
- Heart inflammation and shortness of breath: In a 32-year-old man who consumed 3 boxes of horse chestnut paste over 6 weeks.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Horse chestnut seeds are toxic, and can cause major stomach irritation, vomiting, muscle twitching, incoordination, redness, facial swelling, and other serious conditions. They can also be easily mistaken for edible chestnuts.

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking warfarin, aspirin, or other blood thinners: Horse chestnut products that contain aesculin may increase bleeding risk. Check to make sure that your horse chestnut product is aesculin-free.

- You are taking CYP450 substrate drugs: Horse chestnut may increase their side effects while reducing the effectiveness of such drugs.

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.

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