

Ready to start planning your care? Call us at [800-525-2225](tel:800-525-2225) to make an appointment.

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Cancer Center

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FOR THE MEDIA

Milk thistle is an herb related to the daisy and ragweed family. It is used in traditional medicine to treat liver issues. It comes in supplements as capsules, softgels, tablets, and liquid extracts.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

Milk thistle is used to:

- Treat liver damage caused by drinking a lot of alcohol.
- Treat hepatitis (swelling of the liver).
- Treat liver damage caused by some medications.

Milk thistle has other uses, but doctors have not studied them to see if they work.

Talk with your healthcare providers before taking milk thistle supplements. Herbal supplements are stronger than the herbs you would use in cooking.

They can also interact with some medications and affect how they work. For more information, read the “What else do I need to know?” section below.

What are the side effects?

Side effects of using high doses of milk thistle may include:

- Increase in levels of bilirubin (a substance released when your older red blood cells are replaced by newer ones. Normally your liver helps clear this substance). Most people will not have any symptoms.
- Increase in levels of liver enzymes. Most people will not have any symptoms.

What else do I need to know?

- Talk with your healthcare provider if you’re taking sirolimus (Rapamune®). Milk thistle may increase the side effects of this medication.
- Talk with your doctor if you had or plan to have a kidney transplant. Taking milk thistle with sirolimus (Rapamune®) and nivolumab (Opdivo®) may lead to your body rejecting the donor kidney.
- Talk with your healthcare provider if you’re on Haloperidol (Haldol Decanoate®) or Risperidone (Risperdal M-TAB®, Risperdal Consta®, Risperdal®). Milk thistle may cause pancreatitis (swelling of pancreas) if you take it with these medications.
- Do not take milk thistle if you’re allergic to plants in the daisy or ragweed family.

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.

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