



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Pokeweed

This information describes the common uses of Pokeweed, how it works, and its possible side effects.

Tell your healthcare providers about any dietary supplements you're taking, such as herbs, vitamins, minerals, and natural or home remedies. This will help them manage your care and keep you safe.

What is it?

Pokeweed has toxic effects and should not be used to attempt to treat any medical condition.

Pokeweed products are extracts from all parts of the plant: leaves, root, and berries. Pokeweed contains chemicals that are known toxins, but several of its other components have shown biological activity in lab experiments. For example, pokeweed antiviral protein is able to stop replication of viruses such as herpes simplex, influenza and poliovirus in the test tube, while pokeweed anti-fungal protein does the same to fungi.

Certain saponins from pokeweed also reduce inflammation in rats. None of these effects have been seen in the human body.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- **To treat cancer**

There are no data to back this claim.

- **To treat infections**

Lab studies suggest pokeweed extracts may stop the growth of certain fungi and viruses, but human data are lacking.

- **To reduce inflammation**

Although pokeweed extracts reduced inflammation in an animal study, clinical trials are lacking.

- **To treat tonsillitis**

There are no data to support this claim.

What are the side effects?

- Nausea, vomiting
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhea
- Weakness
- Vomiting blood

- Low blood pressure
- Fast heart rate
- **Toxicity** from high doses or prolonged use of pokeweed can cause protracted vomiting, bloody diarrhea, difficulty breathing, muscle spasms, convulsions, and death.

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Significant toxicity results from taking pokeweed by mouth or applying it topically.

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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