

Aloe vera treats symptoms, but it's not a cure-all.



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The product: New Chapter Aloe Vera tablets.

The claim: The package asserts that aloe vera is "regarded as valuable internally to virtually every organ system." More specific claims made elsewhere for aloe vera capsules or juice say that the juice may alleviate gastrointestinal distress, such as ulcers or irritable bowel syndrome. Because the juice is thought to boost the immune system, it also receives kudos as a treatment for asthma, inflammation, AIDS and cancer.

Key ingredient: Freeze-dried aloe vera juice concentrate, which is processed from the gel of the aloe vera plant, touted in its own right for its soothing effects on burns and other skin irritations.

Price: \$24.99 for 200 capsules, a 100-day supply. Each tablet contains 300 milligrams of the juice concentrate and equals one ounce of aloe vera juice. The package says that 200 pounds of organic aloe vera juice go into the production of one pound of the freeze-dried concentrate.

Other sources: A number of companies make versions of the capsules or juice, which normally has to be kept refrigerated. If you can't find this product in a store, it is available on the Internet.

How it works: Most researchers who advocate aloe vera point to what they call the plant's mucinous polysaccharides, which are long-chain sugar molecules, as the secret to its success.

One of these long-chain sugar molecules, acemannan, may have the ability to block viruses from entering healthy cells, keeping a potential danger at bay and helping the immune system fight diseases like AIDS and possibly cancer. From a gastrointestinal standpoint, aloe vera is thought to protect already inflamed areas from further irritations, hence its success with ameliorating stomach ailments. In addition, aloe vera appears to improve protein absorption, helping with digestion.

Scientific evidence: Much research has focused on the topical powers of aloe vera, which are potent indeed. (And not surprisingly for anyone who has reached for the aloe vera plant after suffering a burn in the kitchen, the scientific results back up the folk medicine.) Some studies have explored whether taking aloe vera orally as juice, gel or capsule can improve health, but most of these trials have been small-scale and not duplicated. In

addition, no studies have confirmed that taking these capsules is equivalent to taking aloe vera juice.

In one clinical study, patients given aloe vera orally demonstrated a complete recovery from ulcers. A study in the alternative medical press attested to the juice's ability to ease the common symptoms of irritable bowel disease. Others have suggested that aloe vera might help diabetic patients reduce blood glucose levels. And small-scale non-randomized trials have shown that drinking aloe vera juice can help erase certain symptoms of AIDS.

Possible dangers: As with any plant products, potential allergies and development of hypersensitivity are potential side effects with aloe vera. Some experts warn against taking aloe if you suffer from kidney or heart disease. Finally, be aware that aloe vera may treat symptoms but it does not cure the disease. So as soon as you stop taking the aloe vera, whatever benefits you have received from it will also cease.

Bottom line: That aloe vera plant in your house or yard is worth every cent; when you need it, you just snip off a piece of a leaf. Unfortunately aloe vera capsules are more expensive and the few studies that have been done are not particularly persuasive. Without any harder proof that this product does abate certain diseases, it may be premature to use aloe vera for anything other than what it may well do best, using it topically to soothe burns and skin irritations.

(Shari Rudavsky writes for The Miami Herald. If there's a supplement or health claim you want to know more about, Write to The Health Page, The Miami Herald, 1 Herald Plaza, Miami, FL 33132.)

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