

Aloe Vera: Actually Two Very Different Herbs in One.



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For many Americans, spreading gel from an aloe leaf on a burn is their first encounter with a medicinal herb, one that dates back to Mesopotamian times.

There are hundreds of species of aloe plants, but the most popular is Aloe vera, also taxonomically known as Aloe barbadensis, a relative of the lily. The aloe plant yields both aloe gel and aloe juice. This can be confusing, since the two terms are interchanged or misused in ads for aloe products. While they share certain chemical components, the gel and juice are distinctly different, with different properties and uses.

What it Might Do: The clear gel, or mucilage, comes from the inner part of aloe leaves. Aloe gel is famous for its wound-healing properties and as a remedy for minor burns, abrasions and other skin irritations. Aloe gel also provides moisture and soothes the skin, hence its wide use in cosmetics, moisturizing creams, lotions and over-the-counter remedies like hemorrhoidal ointments. Some researchers believe aloe gel also can claim antibacterial and antifungal action, though the evidence is mixed. Aloe juice, or latex, comes from just beneath the skin of the leaves. It is a potent cathartic used as an ingredient in some laxatives.

How it Works: Topical application of aloe gel is thought to ease pain by inhibiting a pain-producing chemical called bradykinin. Aloe gel also appears to hinder the formation of thromboxane, a chemical that delays wound healing. Aloe juice contains powerful laxatives called anthraquinones, also found in senna, rhubarb and cascara sagrada.

If You Take: Little is known about the stability of the active ingredients in the myriad of commercial products that contain aloe gel. Some contain insignificant amounts of aloe; EN suggests looking for products with aloe as the first or second ingredient, or those that disclose the percentage of aloe in the product. For maximum effectiveness, nothing beats fresh aloe gel right from the leaf of a potted plant. Aloe plants require little care; growing your own on a windowsill is simple and provides an instant home remedy.

Caution: There are no known adverse reactions to the topical use of aloe gel unless you are allergic to lilies--relatively uncommon. Aloe juice, however, can cause cramping, diarrhea and gastrointestinal bleeding when taken internally. It can aggravate ulcers, hemorrhoids, diverticulitis, inflammatory bowel disease and colitis. It should not be used by pregnant women; its strong cathartic action may trigger contractions.

EN Weighs In: There's an impressive body of folklore, as well as some scientific research, to support aloe's ability to relieve pain and help heal minor burns and skin irritations. However, the use of aloe should not take the place of proper wound care, or medical

attention should infection set in. If you're looking for a natural laxative, we don't recommend aloe juice. Try a safer laxative with proven results like psyllium, or eat a high-fiber diet.