

[< Back to previous page](#)

[Home](#) > [Health](#)

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## Bitter Truth: Aloe Vera

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ALOE VERA: Research has shown aloe vera causes improvement in those eczema and autoimmune diseases. (Courtesy of Flowers and Plants Association)

Aloe vera, revered by the ancients 5,000 years ago for wound healing and treatment of burns, is once again gaining the interest of researchers. Aloe means bitter in Arabic, and vera is Latin for truth.

Spanish missionaries planted it near where they settled and used it to aid the sick. For centuries the Sonora Indians of Mexico used aloe vera to dress battle wounds during times of conflict with neighboring Indians. So did Alexander the Great who, during his conquests, sought the aloe plant because it accelerated the recovery of his men's war injuries. Arabs used it to protect themselves from sunburn, and for this reason it is known as the "lily of the desert." It was also used in ancient Egypt and by many other civilizations for its healing

effects. More recently it has been used during x-ray therapy to avoid radiation burns.

Originating in Africa, aloe vera can grow up to six feet high. It is a member of the Lily family, has connections to the garlic and onion families and looks like a cactus.

The polysaccharides in most plants have little or no effect, but the polysaccharides from the aloe vera plant, bind growth factors in wounds instead of destroying them as other plants do, according to Dr. Ian Tizard, professor of immunology and researcher at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas University. He says this is a key factor in speeding up the healing process of wounds and burns. When a plant is damaged or its stem is broken, it usually turns brown and decays. When this happens to aloe, the liquid quickly seals the injury. It can be taken when necessary for medicinal purposes without compromising its growth.

The leaves contain a liquid from which the active ingredients are derived. Once placed upon the skin, aloe immediately forms a gel-like coating, which protects the wound or burn. Pressure sores in the elderly, for example, have been known to benefit from the application of aloe vera gel. Today many products contain aloe. However, much of the effectiveness may be lost due to over-processing. Some researchers find that simply having a plant at home is the best, since one can quite easily cut a leaf from that plant and then apply the liquid directly on the effected area.

Dr. Peter Atherton is studying the medicinal effects of the plant at Oxford University and has authored a book called "The Essential Aloe Vera." After one of his patients mentioned that her son had found aloe vera remarkably effective against eczema, he investigated its effects on other patients.

He found aloe vera helpful for skin ailments. He also found drinking aloe vera liquid helpful for those with immunological problems.

If you want to place nature's healing at your fingertips, you cannot make a better start than by cultivating your very own aloe vera plant.

*Sources: Bartram's Encyclopedia of Herbal Medicine; <http://www.positivehealth.com/permit/Articles/aloe%20vera/atherton.htm>*