Milk thistle ? Does it do a body good? [1]

Dear Alice,

What part ‘milk thistle’ is used for medication and how?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Milk thistle, also known as St. Mary’s thistle, holy thistle, and variegated artichoke, is a plant that has been used as a medicinal treatment for 2,000 years. Don’t be fooled by the name though, milk thistle doesn’t contain or produce any milk. When the leaves of the plant are crushed, a milky white sap is released. Historically, milk thistle has been used to treat headaches, digestive and liver problems, and to stimulate lactation. Some cultures have also used roasted milk thistle seeds as an alternative to coffee!

The active ingredient in milk thistle is silymarin, which is a chemical produced in the plant’s seeds. Milk thistle products are available in various forums such as tablets, teas, topical creams, and injectables. Silymarin is a powerful antioxidant that has anti-inflammatory properties. Studies have shown that silymarin can protect the liver from toxins, which can improve overall liver function. It does this by forming a complex that prevents toxins from entering the liver cells. It can also repair existing liver cells.

There is some evidence that milk thistle may improve liver, kidney, and gall bladder conditions like cirrhosis, diabetes, and kidney disease. Milk thistle has also been shown to counteract the effects of ingesting poisonous mushrooms in animal studies. Other animal studies suggest that milk thistle might have anti-cancer effects. Some researchers have found that silymarin help prevent tumors from developing and may also have a positive effect on cancer treatments. However, similar clinical trials with humans are limited, which means this evidence is inconclusive for now. For all of these conditions, more clinical trials are needed in order to produce definitive evidence for milk thistle’s effectiveness in treatment.

Though milk thistle is likely to be safe (if used as indicated) and has been shown to provide health benefits for some people, it may also have serious side effects for others. Because there haven’t been enough studies in children and women who are pregnant or breastfeeding to inform safe use of milk thistle, it’s recommended that they consult a health care provider first. The Mayo Clinic [2] and the University of Maryland Medical Center [3] has more information about the safety of milk thistle, its potential side effects, and interactions.
Consulting a health care provider before trying any type of medicinal treatment (even natural ones) is a good idea. This is especially important because herbal supplements like milk thistle are not regulated the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Kudos to you for looking into the usefulness and safety of herbal supplements? a better understanding is the best way to make informed, healthy decisions!

Alice!
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