

The Longwood Herbal Task Force
(<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/default.htm>) and
The Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research

Patient Fact Sheet

CAT'S CLAW

CAT'S CLAW (*Uncaria tomentosa*) is a woody vine from Peru. Its name comes from the hook-like thorns it uses to climb trees. The herbal medicine comes from the inner bark of the roots and stems. It is available in capsules and as dried bark for making tea. The main biochemical ingredients are called *oxindole alkaloids*.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

Some herbalists recommend cat's claw to treat cancer, HIV disease/AIDS, arthritis, allergies, gastritis and intestinal problems, chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

There are not many scientific studies of cat's claw. There are some reports that it is helpful for people with cancer, HIV, and arthritis, but these patients were also taking other medicines, and the studies did not compare people who took cat's claw with people who did not.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Side effects are usually mild. They may include:

- ◆ Allergic reaction, including itching or hives
- ◆ Diarrhea the first few days
- ◆ Upset stomach
- ◆ Kidney failure (very rare).

A different species of cat's claw, which is sometimes mixed in, can cause low blood pressure and sedation (sleepiness).

Contamination with other herbs can cause symptoms of cyanide poisoning.

IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

- ◆ Cat's claw is traditionally used to cause abortion, so it should not be taken during pregnancy.
- ◆ It is traditionally not considered safe for children less than three years old, or for women who are breastfeeding.

WILL IT INTERFERE WITH MY OTHER MEDICATIONS OR MY MEDICAL CONDITION?

- ◆ Cat's claw is usually not recommended for people with autoimmune diseases, multiple

(continued)

sclerosis, tuberculosis, transplants, or hemophilia.

- ◆ It is usually not recommended for people taking insulin, vaccines, immune globulin, serum, or thymus extracts.
- ◆ People who take medications for high blood pressure should be careful when taking cat's claw, because some species can cause low blood pressure.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

- ◆ Tea can be made from 1/2 to 1 ounce of dried bark, boiled in 1 quart of water for 3 hours until the volume is reduced to about one third. This tea can be taken three times a day.
- ◆ Capsules of 350-500 mg may be taken once or twice a day.
- ◆ No standardized preparations are available, and the amount of active ingredients can be very different depending on the species and the growing and harvesting conditions.
- ◆ Doses for children are unknown.
- ◆ Follow your health care provider's instructions.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- ◆ Always tell your doctor or nurse practitioner if you are taking any herb, and before starting any new herb. Your health care provider needs to know everything you are taking to help you make decisions about your health care. Herbs can cause problems with other herbs, dietary supplements, or medications.
- ◆ Herbal products may contain chemicals or other species of plants. This is especially a problem with cat's claw, because there are several species in Peru called "cat's claw" besides *Uncaria tomentosa*, and many more species of *Uncaria* in Asia. Different species contain chemicals with different effects.