

Comfrey

(*Symphytum officinale*)



Comfrey (Symphytum officinale) is an ancient herb that has been used topically since antiquity to help heal broken bones. In fact, one of its common names is knitbone. Over the centuries, comfrey has also been taken orally for a number of internal problems and given to humans and animals as a general tonic. Modern science has confirmed that comfrey contains substances that aid in the healing of bruises and bone, muscle and connective tissue injuries and may help ease joint pain.

Habitat

Comfrey grows well in North America and Europe as well as many other places because it adapts well to a variety of soil types. However, because the comfrey plant looks very similar to other herbs that can be very deadly, you should not attempt to harvest it yourself unless you have been trained to do so by a skilled herbalist.

Parts of the Plant Used for Medicinal Purposes

Historically, the leaf, root, and rhizome have all been used to make herbal medicines. Today, it is known that the roots contain 10-16 times the amount of poisonous pyrrolizidine alkaloids than the leaves have, and new leaves contain more of the unwanted substance than older ones do. Other factors, such as the time of harvest, also impact

the final chemical makeup of the leaves. Today, reputable companies produce comfrey preparations that use only the leaves of the plant. However, it is very important to read the ingredients list and label directions carefully and to research the manufacturer of your comfrey product before you use it.

Active Ingredients

Comfrey contains allantoin, a naturally occurring chemical which is known to help new skin cells form. It also contains other substances that encourage skin health and help to reduce inflammation. These substances make it a natural choice for muscle and ligament injuries, sprains, strains and broken bones. It may also be effective in the treatment of osteoarthritis, but because it is not safe for long-term use, it has limited applications for arthritis and other chronic conditions. Because comfrey contains at least eight different poisonous pyrrolizidine alkaloids that are absorbed through the skin and build up in the liver, it cannot be used on many skin conditions that involve openings in the skin, such as abrasions or skin ulcers.

Available Forms

Comfrey products in the United States, the United Kingdom and much of Europe are limited to creams, liniments and ointments intended for topical use only. Ointments are typically the most concentrated of these products, containing between five and 20 percent comfrey. Look for products that state specifically that they are made from the leaves of common comfrey. Avoid products that contain roots, stems or rhizomes. Also be certain to buy from reputable companies, since only one variety of comfrey, *Symphytum officinale*, also known as common comfrey, is considered safe enough for medicinal use. Some products labeled *Symphytum officinale* have been found to contain other types of comfrey, such as *Symphytum asperum*, commonly known as prickly comfrey, or *Symphytum x uplandicum*, commonly called Russian Comfrey.

Risks

Comfrey contains large amounts of a deadly pyrrolizidine alkaloids. These chemicals accumulate in the liver and cause irreversible damage and even death. As a result, comfrey is no longer taken internally, and oral preparations containing the herb are now banned in the United States, the United Kingdom and most of Europe. Topical preparations are still used in adults, but they should only be made from certain parts of the plant and must not be used on broken skin or for more than ten days.

Drug Interactions

Because a large number of medications and herbal preparations have the potential to interact dangerously with comfrey, consult your health care provider or pharmacist before using comfrey along with any other prescription or over-the-counter medications or herbal products.



What is comfrey oil?

Comfrey is a flowering shrub that grows in Europe, Asia and, now, North America. The roots and leaves of the comfrey plant have medicinal properties. Comfrey oil is made by infusing the leaves and roots of a comfrey plant with a neutral oil. Most comfrey oils keep for around 2 years after production.

Benefits of comfrey oil

Topically applied comfrey oil is associated with a wide range of health benefits and can help with certain issues including:

- **Grazes**

Comfrey oil is good at helping with superficial cuts, scratches, and scrapes. Children, who suffer from these injuries the most, are statistically unlikely to have adverse reactions to comfrey oil when used on scrapes.

- **Fractures**

When comfrey was applied topically to animals above where they'd suffered bone fractures, their bones healed at a much-improved rate than animals who hadn't been treated with comfrey.

- **Encourages leg ulcer recovery**

Leg ulcers are uncomfortable, prone to infection, and can take a long time to heal. Scientific studies have shown comfrey oil can help reduce the likelihood leg ulcers will become infected.

- **Back discomfort**

Topical application of comfrey oil has been shown to support the lower and upper back more than methyl nicotinate, the main ingredient in many muscle creams.

Comfrey oil uses

Comfrey oil should be applied topically to parts of the body where you have muscular pain or discomfort.

Potential comfrey oil side effects

Comfrey oil shouldn't be used for cooking, [like other types of cooking oil](#). Ingesting cooking oil has been banned by the European Union, due to a high risk of liver toxicity.

Adults with liver disease, cancer, or a history of alcoholism are also advised to avoid comfrey because the skin can also absorb the liver-damaging compounds. However, not a rate considered harmful for those with healthy livers.