

Fennel Wood Tree

Sassafras

Sassafras albidum

Lauraceae



Sassafras tea is a popular beverage that's favored for its distinct flavor and aroma, which are reminiscent of root beer.

Once considered a household staple, it has become harder to find.

Despite its long-standing reputation as a powerful medicinal herb, some research suggests that sassafras could do more harm than good.

This article takes a close look at the potential health benefits and side effects of sassafras tea.

What is sassafras tea?

Sassafras is a tree that's native to certain parts of North America and Eastern Asia.

It has smooth bark and fragrant leaves, both of which have been used in traditional medicine for centuries to treat ailments like diarrhea, colds, skin diseases, and more .

Sassafras has also been used to thicken foods, brew tea, and produce filé powder — a seasoning used in Creole cuisine.

Sassafras tea is made by boiling the root bark of the tree in water for 15–20 minutes, allowing the flavors to infuse the liquid.

It's commonly combined with other herbs, including ginger, cinnamon, cloves, or aniseed, to produce a flavor-packed, nutrient-rich beverage.

The use of sassafras has become controversial over the past few decades. That's because it contains safrole, a compound that has been banned by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) due to its potentially toxic effects .

Manufacturers have started removing safrole during processing, and you can now purchase sassafras root bark without safrole at many health stores and herb suppliers in dry or powder form.

Safrole-containing sassafras root bark is still available, but for legal purposes, it can only be sold as a topical skin wash or potpourri.

Health benefits

While research on the effects of sassafras tea itself is lacking, several test-tube studies suggest that sassafras and the compounds it contains may benefit your health.

The following health benefits may be associated with drinking sassafras tea.



Reduces inflammation

Sassafras contains several compounds shown to reduce inflammation.

In fact, one test-tube study found that multiple compounds in sassafras, including sassarandainol, blocked the activity of enzymes that trigger inflammation.

Although acute inflammation is an important aspect of your immune function, chronic inflammation is thought to contribute to the development of conditions like heart disease, cancer, and diabetes .

However, research on the anti-inflammatory effects of sassafras tea is limited, and more studies are needed to understand if drinking this tea may reduce inflammation in humans.

Acts as a diuretic

Sassafras is thought to have natural diuretic properties .

Diuretics are substances that increase your urine production, helping your body excrete water and salt .

Diuretics are often used to treat issues like high blood pressure and fluid retention, especially in those who have chronic kidney disease .

Some people also use natural diuretics to flush out water weight and prevent bloating.

Nevertheless, more research is needed to determine if sassafras tea has these effects.



May protect against infection

Leishmaniasis is a parasitic infection that is spread by sand fly bites. It's common in the tropics, subtropics, and certain areas of Southern Europe .

Interestingly, specific compounds in sassafras are thought to help treat it.

One test-tube study found that sassafras bark extract had anti-leishmaniasis activity against promastigotes — the form of the parasite when it enters the skin of a host.

Still, keep in mind that this study used a concentrated amount of a compound isolated from sassafras.

Additional studies are needed to evaluate if sassafras has anti-leishmaniasis properties in humans or may help treat other parasitic infections.

Potential side effects

Despite the potential health benefits associated with sassafras, it has been the subject of heated controversy for decades.

This is mostly due to the presence of safrole, a chemical compound in sassafras oil that can be toxic to humans .

In fact, in 1960 the FDA banned the use of safrole and sassafras oil as a food additive or flavoring .

According to the National Toxicology Program's Report on Carcinogens, multiple studies in mice show that safrole may induce liver cancer and tumor growth .Although research in humans is lacking, the organization has classified safrole as "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen" based on the results of these animal studies .



Also, isosafrole, a compound synthesized from safrole, is used in the production of illegal drugs like MDMA, commonly known as ecstasy or molly . For this reason, products containing sassafras are highly regulated by the government, and many manufacturers remove safrole during processing to avoid trade restrictions.

Selecting sassafras tea that is free of safrole and moderating your intake can help minimize any potential adverse health effects.

If you experience any symptoms like sweating, vomiting, or hot flashes, discontinue use immediately and consult your healthcare provider.

The tea may also have sedative properties, potentially causing interactions with sedative medications like lorazepam, clonazepam, and diazepam .

Finally, note that sassafras tea is not recommended for women who are pregnant, regardless of its safrole content, as it's thought to stimulate menstrual flow .

The bottom line

Sassafras tea is produced from the root bark of the sassafras tree, which is native to parts of North America and Eastern Asia.

Test-tube studies show that sassafras and its components may reduce inflammation, act as a diuretic, and help treat leishmaniasis, a parasitic infection.

However, other studies have found that safrole, a compound in sassafras oil, may promote cancer growth. Thus, the FDA has banned its use as a food additive.

It's best to select safrole-free varieties of sassafras tea and moderate your intake to prevent any side effects.

