

Cat's Claw

Uncaria tomentosa (Willd.) DC.; *Uncaria guianensis* (Aubl.) Gmel.

[Fam. Rubiaceae]

OVERVIEW

Cat's claw (*uña de gato* in Spanish), refers to at least 20 plants with sharp, curved thorns, two of which are discussed in this sheet: *Uncaria tomentosa* (UT) and *U. guianensis* (UG), both native to the South and Central American tropical rain forests. UT and UG have a long history of use by indigenous people of these areas to treat health problems including rheumatism, arthritis, other chronic inflammatory disorders, gastric ulcers, gastrointestinal disorders, tumors, and as a contraceptive.

There are five types of products offered mainly by three manufacturers: (1) an aqueous-acid or hydroalcoholic extract of UT root standardized to pentacyclic oxindole acids (POAs) with no tetracyclic oxindole acids (TOAs) [herein referred to as UT-POA]; (2) an aqueous UT extract standardized to carboxy alkyl esters (CAEs) [UT-CAEs]; (3) and an aqueous UG extract [UG]. Two additional types of cat's claw products are relatively generic and usually labeled as UT: extracts not standardized to any particular constituent [UT-unspecified] and raw root bark products powdered in capsules or tablets, or finely cut for teas (the traditional form of use). [EDITORS' NOTE: Because each cat's claw species and preparation-type has a different chemical profile, the biological actions and uses for one may not apply to another.]

PRIMARY USES

Osteoarthritis (of the knee); rheumatoid arthritis along with conventional treatment. Other potential uses: anti-inflammatory; immune system modulator.

DOSAGE

Crude Preparations

UG CAPSULES: 100 mg 1–3x/day.

UT-unspecified:

CAPSULES: 350–500 mg, 1–2x/day.

TEA: 1 g root bark boiled for 15 min. in 250 ml water, 1–3x/day.

TINCTURE: 1–2 ml, 2–3x/day.

Standardized Preparations

UT-CAE TABLETS: 350 mg/day.

Comments

When using a dietary supplement, purchase it from a reliable source. For best results, use the same brand of product throughout the period of use. As with all medications and dietary supplements, please inform your healthcare provider of all herbs and medications you are taking. Interactions may occur between medications and herbs or even among different herbs when taken at the same time. Treat your herbal supplement with care by taking it as directed, storing it as advised on the label, and keeping it out of the reach of children and pets. Consult your healthcare provider with any questions.

UT-POA CAPSULES: One capsule 3x/day for the 1st 10 days, and one capsule/day thereafter.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

None reported for UG, UT-unspecified, and UT-CAE. UT-POA: Based on the belief that cat's claw is an immunostimulant, it is not advised for patients awaiting bone marrow or organ transplant, persons with medically-induced immunosuppression (e.g., patients with organ transplants), autoimmune disease, multiple sclerosis, or tuberculosis. HIV/AIDS patients should proceed with caution when introducing any new therapeutic agent. Cat's claw is not for use in children under 3 years.

PREGNANCY AND LACTATION: Not recommended due to lack of data.

ADVERSE EFFECTS

Recent human trials conclude that various cat's claw preparations are safe, with no adverse effects reported in liver, kidney, central nervous system, cardiovascular or blood functions. Cat's claw teas or crude extracts may cause mild nausea, due to bitter taste; however, this appears speculative as nausea is not frequently reported. UT-POA: In AIDS patients and patients receiving large doses of chemotherapy, individual mild cases of red blood cell elevation were reported. During the first 1–2 weeks of cat's claw tea use constipation or mild diarrhea was sometimes observed. Increased occurrence of acne symptoms was reported in HIV patients with prior acne symptoms. In rare cases, elevated uric acid values were observed in HIV and cancer patients; extensive cell die-off in cancer patients may cause a fever lasting 1–2 weeks.

DRUG INTERACTIONS

None reported for UG, UT-unspecified, and UT-CAE. UT-POA: The leading Austrian cat's claw manufacturer advises: Take between and after chemotherapy treatment, but not during; do not take with passive animal vaccines, intravenous hyperimmunoglobulin therapy; intravenous thymic extracts, drugs using animal protein or peptide hormones (e.g., bovine or porcine insulin), or precipitate from frozen or fresh blood plasma.



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