



Ginkgo *(Ginkgo biloba)*

- from the dried leaves of the ginkgo tree
- comes in liquid, tablets, capsules, and dry loose leaves

What is it used for?

Studies have shown ginkgo biloba may be useful for adults with dementia (Alzheimer's disease or multi-infarct dementia) to improve problems with memory and attention. Ginkgo may also be useful for people with peripheral vascular disease (poor circulation) to reduce pain while walking.

Before treating symptoms, talk with your health care practitioner. Also, refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, which provides information about when to seek professional care and when it's safe to self-treat.

How much should I take?

Published studies and reviews suggest the following dosages:

- Dementia: Take 40–80 mg in tablet or capsule form, three times a day with food.
- Peripheral vascular disease: Take 40 mg in tablet or capsule form, three times a day with food.
- Do not use teas. They are made from dry leaves and are not strong enough for herbal medicine effects. Symptoms may improve after several weeks of use. Ginkgo has been studied for use up to one year.

Is it safe to take?

Like other herbal supplements, no producer of ginkgo has sought FDA approval for the herb, so there is no governmental assurance of safety. Ginkgo is usually well-tolerated; however, it may increase the risk of bleeding. Do not give ginkgo to children because the seeds can cause seizures or death in children. It is important to discuss herb use with your health care professional, especially if you take prescription drugs. Also see box at right.

What are the side effects?

Side effects are not common, but may include nausea, diarrhea, upset stomach due to gas, skin rash or redness, headache, or a risk of bleeding in the brain (subdural hematoma). Do not swallow ginkgo seeds.

If you notice any side effects, stop taking ginkgo and call your health care professional. You may report side effects directly to the FDA MedWatch at **1-800-FDA-1088** or on the Internet at www.fda.gov/medwatch.

Questionable claims

Be aware that some herbal manufacturers make product claims without any proof that their claims are true. It has not been proven that ginkgo relieves asthma symptoms, vertigo (dizziness), tinnitus (ringing in the ears), or chilblains (inflammation of the toes, fingers, ears, or face); nor has it been shown to aid digestion or improve memory or concentration in people *without* dementia.

Do not use this supplement if you

- take medicines to thin your blood such as warfarin or Coumadin, heparin, Plavix, Ticlid, Aggrenox, aspirin or ibuprofen, or other aspirin-like medicines.
- have a history of bleeding problems.
- have a history of allergic reaction to this herb.
- have a surgery or other procedure scheduled. This herb may cause bleeding problems or interfere with anesthesia. Stop taking this herb three weeks before any procedure.
- plan to become pregnant, are pregnant, or are breastfeeding.
- take medicines to control seizures (anticonvulsants) or MAO inhibitors for depression.

Herbal medicine: safety and quality matter

Safety issues

In recent years there has been increasing interest in and use of herbal products. Many people think that because “it’s natural, it must be safe.” However, anything that has possible *good effects* also has *side effects*. In fact, some herbs can cause sickness and even death. For example, ephedra/ma huang, used as a decongestant and appetite suppressant, is known to cause heart and blood pressure problems. Research on herbal effectiveness, side effects, and herb-drug interactions is only now beginning.

Quality issues

In the United States, herbal products are not categorized as drugs, so they are not regulated by our government. They do not have to be tested for safety or purity by manufacturers, and studies have shown that the amount of herb can range from 0 percent to 150 percent of the amount claimed on the label. The herb in the bottle may even differ from the herb on the label. Here are some of the other problems that can occur:

- Toxicity from the herb (the herb makes you sick)
- Contaminated with microorganisms (the herb causes infection)
- Contaminated with pesticides (pesticide used on the herb makes you sick)
- Imported herbal products may have prescription drugs added

Herbs at Kaiser Permanente

- Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions. However, they are not required to go through FDA approval.
- As your partner in health, we encourage you to read this summary of currently available information. If you have any questions, talk with your health care professional.

Before you self-treat

Before treating symptoms, refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, which provides information about when to seek professional care and when it’s safe to self-treat.

If you have further questions, talk with your personal physician or your pharmacist, or visit your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department. For more information, you can order a free copy of our *Healthwise Handbook* by calling **1-800-464-4000** (English), **1-800-788-0616** (Spanish), or **1-800-777-1370** (TTY).

Consult a trusted information source such as Kaiser Permanente Online www.kponline.org, our national members-only Web site, or the National Institutes of Health on the Web at nccam.nih.gov.

This herb data is provided for informational purposes only. This is not an endorsement of any product nor is it meant to substitute for the advice provided by physicians or other health care professionals. The information herein should not be used to diagnose or treat any health problem or disease.

