

herbs at a glance

European Elder



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This fact sheet provides basic information about European elder—common names, what the science says, potential side effects and cautions, and resources for more information.

Common Names—European elder, black elder, elder, elderberry, elder flower, sambucus

Latin Name—*Sambucus nigra*

European elder is a tree native to Europe and parts of Asia and Africa, and it also grows in the United States. There are several different types of elder, such as American elder, but European elder is the type most often used as a supplement. Parts of the elder tree—such as the berries and flowers—have historically been used for pain, swelling, infections, coughs, and skin conditions. Current folk or traditional uses of elderberry and elder flower include flu, colds, fevers, constipation, and sinus infections.

The dried flowers (elder flower) and the cooked blue/black berries (elderberry) of the European elder tree are used in teas, liquid extracts, and capsules.

What the Science Says

- Although some small studies show that elderberry may relieve flu symptoms, the evidence is not strong enough to support this use of the berry.
- A few studies have suggested that a product containing elder flower and other herbs can help treat sinus infections when used with antibiotics, but further research is needed to confirm any benefit.
- No reliable information is available on the effectiveness of elderberry and elder flower for other uses.

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Side Effects and Cautions

- Uncooked or unripe elderberries are toxic and cause nausea, vomiting, or severe diarrhea. Only the blue/black berries of elder are edible.
- Because of elder flower's possible diuretic effects, use caution if taking it with drugs that increase urination.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary health practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This helps to ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about complementary and alternative medicine, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

Sources

Elder (*Sambucus nigra* L.). Natural Standard Database Web site. Accessed at www.naturalstandard.com on May 26, 2009.

Elder flower. In: Blumenthal M, Goldberg A, Brinckman J, eds. *Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs*. Newton, MA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2000:103-105.

Elderberry. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at www.naturaldatabase.com on May 29, 2009.

Elderflower. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at www.naturaldatabase.com on May 29, 2009.

For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely* (nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiseuse.htm).

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