Ask EN

Go for Natural Laxative Relief, But Best If Not From Senna or Cascara

Q. My natural laxative contains the herbs senna and cascara sagrada. Are they effective and safe?

A. Effective, yes, as anyone who has ever taken them can attest. They are safe, however, only for occasional, limited use. Long-term use of either of these two potent laxative herbs is not recommended for anyone.

Natural, But Not Gentle. Senna (Cassia senna or Cassia angustifolia) and cascara sagrada (Rhamnus purshiana) are found in many laxative, digestive and "colon cleanser" products, such as Senokot, Ex-Lax, Naturalax, Natural Swiss Kriss Herbal Laxative, Health Plus Super Colon Cleanser and Swedish Bitters. Classified as "stimulant" herbs, senna and cascara contain compounds called anthraquinones, which stimulate bowel contractions—sometimes too fast or too intensely. Senna, in particular, can cause severe cramping.

Chronic use (more than seven days) of such powerful stimulant herbs can cause fluid and electrolyte losses, especially if cardiac medications, diuretics or corticosteroids are also taken. Moreover, chronic use can destroy bowel tone, making you dependent on them for normal bowel function—similar to what can happen with pharmaceutical laxatives.

You should definitely avoid these herbs if you are pregnant or nursing (they also increase uterine contractions) or if you have any inflammatory condition of the intestines, intestinal obstruction or undiagnosed stomach pain. Other stimulant herbs to use with care are aloes juice (not to be confused with aloe gel, used externally), rhubarb root, buckthorn bark and castor oil.

Better Natural Choices. Far safer for chronic constipation relief are bulk-forming fiber supplements, such as psyllium, flaxseed, pectin, agar, karaya and guar gum, which promote the body's own natural mechanism for elimination. These plant fibers swell when consumed with adequate fluids, softening stools for easier passage and stimulating bowel movement with their large bulk. They also help support healthy intestinal flora. Psyllium—the ingredient in Metamucil—is particularly effective. Other natural laxative ingredients to look for on labels include wheat bran, oats and fructooligosaccharides.

EN's Bottom Line. EN recommends first trying a bran cereal every morning before you resort to fancy powders and potions. The combination of bran, fluids and exercise usually proves potent enough for most people. For prolonged constipation, see a doctor.

Finding Natural Relief
- Eat a fiber-rich diet (25-35 grams a day) that includes bran, dried plums (see page 8), dates and figs. Increase fiber gradually to avoid gas pains.
- Drink at least six to eight cups a day of fluids, especially water.
- Exercise regularly; walking does wonders for regularity.
- Consider a bulk-forming agent like psyllium. Follow fluid recommendations; anyone who has problems swallowing should use extra caution.
- Avoid stimulant herbs like senna and cascara, except as a last resort, and then never for more than one week.

Myriad Uses for Vinegar....Weight Loss Isn't One of Them

Q. I've heard that apple cider vinegar can help me lose weight. Is that true?

A. Don't count on it. Despite that, the Apple Cider Vinegar Diet seems to be gaining popularity. This version of the diet even has its own website, which declares the diet is intended for "normal people with normal busy lifestyles and a normal income, who wish to lose weight, cellulite and detoxify successfully without being on a fad diet." Ha!

This is one of those gimmick diets that just won't die, resurfacing with regularity, spawning several books in the process. But there's no secret to weight loss here. The reason the diet works is simple—food intake is restricted. Indeed, the seven-day meal plan (which directions say "can be repeated indefinitely") is low in calories, carbohydrates and fat. No wonder you lose weight.

The gimmick is the vinegar—in tablet form—which is advised for "a far greater rate of success." You are instructed to take two upon rising, one with each meal and two at bedtime. (Why apple cider vinegar specifically? Probably because it sounds healthier.)

Why It Won't Melt Fat. Like the legendary grapefruit diet, this diet claims that vinegar's acid will help melt fat away. That's just plain ludicrous. Taking vinegar simply adds to the pool of digestive juices already present in the stomach. "The acid, the acidity [vintage] would be eclipsed by the outpouring of [even more acid] hydrochloric acid in the stomach naturally," explains food scientist Manfred Kroger, Ph.D., of Pennsylvania State University in University Park. "If anything, the acid would help break down fats in the diet, so you would absorb them more readily," adds Barry Swanson, Ph.D., professor of nutrition at Washington State University in Pullman. Not exactly what you want when trying to lose weight!

What Vinegar Can Do. Vinegar is a wonderful flavoring agent that adds zest and tang to salads and marinades. It contains a mere two calories per tablespoon, with no fat or sodium.

Besides its food uses, vinegar is touted as an environmentally safe grease cutter and stain remover. It's also credited with soothing sore throats, dissolving warts, treating fungal infections, removing mineral deposits in coffee makers, loosening food spills and cleaning wood floors.

EN's Bottom Line. Vinegar is certainly handy to have around, but not as a weight-loss aid.

Write to us if you have a question. We'll answer those of most interest to our readers. We regret, however, that we cannot personally respond. Send to:
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