Aloe vera — What is it good for?  [1]

Alice,

Have you any information on the medicinal plant aloe vera?

— Desert plants

Answer

Dear Desert plants,

Instantly recognizable by its spiky green leaves, aloe vera is a succulent plant that stores water in its fleshy leaves and thus thrives in arid climates like deserts. Its use as a medicinal plant for soothing various external and internal woes dates back thousands of years. Currently, there’s some evidence to support its use for many of the ailments it’s traditionally been used to treat. Both the aloe gel and the aloe latex (the yellow juice that lines the aloe leaf) from the plant have been used for various conditions, and it can be used topically as a gel or taken orally. Though generally considered to be safe, it may not be appropriate for everyone (more on this in a bit).

There’s some research that shows aloe to be effective as:

- **A treatment for psoriasis.** Topical creams used over a period of time has been shown to reduce the skin plaques commonly associated with psoriasis.
- **A laxative.** Aloe and aloe latex may be taken orally to reduce constipation. However, continued use of aloe latex may reduce potassium levels in the intestine and possibly result in intestinal paralysis (which actually makes a bowel movement more difficult!). In fact, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has since required that aloe latex be removed from laxative products.

Though there’s some anecdotal support for aloe’s use with some of these conditions, further study is needed to determine its effectiveness for:

- **Skin burns and frostbite.** Some evidence suggests aloe may aid in the treatment of mild to moderate skin burns and frostbite.
- **Ulcerative colitis.** Aloe may work better than a placebo in treating colitis.
- **Cold sores.** Aloe extract cream applied several times a day to active cold sores may expedite their healing time.
- **Wound healing.** Though there are some studies that suggest aloe gel may increase blood circulation in the wound thereby reducing cell death, results are mixed. Some research has shown that topical ointments containing aloe may help heal wounds (e.g., hemorrhoid wounds); on the other hand, there are also studies that show it can potentially worsen others (e.g., surgical wounds).
- **Diabetes.** There isn’t a consensus on aloe vera’s ability to reduce blood sugar levels. A few studies noted a blood sugar reduction in women with type 2 diabetes who ingested aloe vera gel; however, those findings were not consistent across other studies.

Before running out to the greenhouse to pick up a plant or to the store to buy supplements, consider this: aloe gel seems to be relatively safe for most people, but some products (especially oral supplements) may need to be used with caution. Taking too much aloe latex or taking it for an extended period of time may result in abdominal cramps, diarrhea, kidney problems, blood in urine, low potassium, muscle weakness, weight loss, heart disturbances, and in some cases, even death. Additionally, though limited, there are reports stating that aloe ingested orally may be linked to thyroid gland issues, liver inflammation, and blood clotting problems. If any of the following risks or conditions are a concern, it’s best to speak with a health care provider before using aloe products:

- **Pregnancy.** Pregnant people may want to be cautious of using aloe (either gel or latex), due to possible development risks to the embryo and fetus.
- **Age.** Children under the age of twelve may experience gastrointestinal upset if aloe is ingested orally.
- **Diabetes.** Those who have diabetes or are undergoing surgery may need to closely monitor blood sugar levels or cease use prior to the scheduled procedure as aloe may lower blood glucose.
- **Various health conditions.** Those such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease, hemorrhoids, and kidney problems also may be aggravated by aloe latex use.
- **Drug interactions.** There are also several types of medications and supplements that interact with aloe vera.

Whether or not it’s harnessed for its medicinal properties, simply having an aloe plant around is an easy way to spruce up any room. In addition to their sassy, spiky look, they’re easy to maintain, as long as you don’t over water these dry soil-loving plants.

Here’s to hoping you’ve found an oasis of knowledge regarding aloe vera.

Alice!

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