

# herbs at a glance

## Horse Chestnut



© Steven Foster

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

**Common Names**—horse chestnut, buckeye, Spanish chestnut

**Latin Name**—*Aesculus hippocastanum*

Horse chestnut trees are native to the Balkan Peninsula (for example, Greece and Bulgaria), but grow throughout the Northern Hemisphere. Although horse chestnut is sometimes called buckeye, it should not be confused with the Ohio or California buckeye trees, which are related but not the same species.

For centuries, horse chestnut seeds, leaves, bark, and flowers were used for a variety of conditions and diseases. Today, horse chestnut seed extract is used primarily as a folk or traditional remedy for chronic venous insufficiency (a condition in which the veins do not efficiently return blood from the legs to the heart). This condition is associated with varicose veins, pain, ankle swelling, feelings of heaviness, itching, and nighttime leg cramping. The seed extract has also been used as a folk or traditional remedy for hemorrhoids.

Horse chestnut seed extract standardized to contain 16 to 20 percent aescin (escin), the active ingredient, is the most commonly used form. Topical preparations have also been used.

### What the Science Says

- Studies have found that horse chestnut seed extract is beneficial in treating chronic venous insufficiency. There is also preliminary evidence that horse chestnut seed extract may be as effective as wearing compression stockings.
- There is not enough scientific evidence to support the use of horse chestnut seed, leaf, or bark for any other conditions.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

National Center for Complementary  
and Alternative Medicine



NCAM

## Side Effects and Cautions

- Do not use raw or unprocessed horse chestnut seeds, leaves, bark, or flowers. They contain esculin, which is poisonous.
- When properly processed, horse chestnut seed extract contains little or no esculin and is considered generally safe when used for short periods of time. However, the extract can cause some side effects, including itching, nausea, or gastrointestinal upset.
- 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 will help 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/](http://nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/).

## Sources

Horse chestnut. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at [www.naturaldatabase.com](http://www.naturaldatabase.com) on September 8, 2009.

Horse chestnut. Natural Standard Database Web site. Accessed at [www.naturalstandard.com](http://www.naturalstandard.com) on September 8, 2009.

Horse chestnut seed extract. In: Blumenthal M, Goldberg A, Brinckman J, eds. *Herbal Medicine: Expanded Commission E Monographs*. Newton, MA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2000:201-204.

## For More Information

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

## NCCAM Clearinghouse

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

E-mail: [info@nccam.nih.gov](mailto:info@nccam.nih.gov)

## PubMed®

Web site: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez)

## NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

Web site: [www.ods.od.nih.gov](http://www.ods.od.nih.gov)

## NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus

Horse Chestnut Listing: [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/1055.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/1055.html)

*This publication is not copyrighted and is in the public domain. Duplication is encouraged.*

NCCAM has provided this material for your information. It is not intended to substitute for the medical expertise and advice of your primary health care provider. We encourage you to discuss any decisions about treatment or care with your health care provider. The mention of any product, service, or therapy is not an endorsement by NCCAM.

National Institutes of Health



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services