

# Milk Thistle

Milk thistle is a herb that grows in many parts of the United States and South America and Europe and is native to Mediterranean countries. In some places, it's considered a weed, and in other places it's eaten; however, milk thistle is best known for its medicinal properties. Milk thistle's history as a medicinal plant stretches back more than 2,000 years, beginning with the ancient Greeks.

## How it works?

Silymarin is the main active ingredient in milk thistle. The benefits of silymarin in the body in the body are not fully understood. Silymarin has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties and this is thought to help the liver repair by growing new cells.

## Conditions Milk Thistle is traditionally used for

There are claims that milk thistle can treat liver and gall bladder problems and it is also traditionally known for help with indigestion, food poisoning and cancer prevention. The types of liver disease that milk thistle has been thought to help include jaundice, hepatitis, cirrhosis and toxin-induced liver damage (eg) damage from paracetamol overuse. Claims that milk thistle can prevent or ease symptoms of diabetes (by improving insulin resistance), cholesterol and cancer are unfounded.

My opinion would be that while milk thistle may have a mild detoxing and a protective effect on the liver it is of no benefit to more serious liver conditions such as hepatitis and cirrhosis.

## Effectiveness

It is not clear how effective milk thistle is for its reputed benefits. Like many natural medicines, there are not enough well designed and validated studies to prove effectiveness. There are a few studies that show that milk thistle is beneficial to the liver and acts as an effective detox. However most other studies do not show any benefit. Because the studies that indicated benefits with milk thistle have serious design flaws (did not have enough participants and did not follow international criteria for proper clinical studies), it is not possible to draw strong conclusions (either for or against) the effectiveness of milk thistle. It is likely we will never know the full benefits of (or lack of) milk thistle as no pharmaceutical company is likely to spend the millions of euro required to do proper studies on a product. This is because it can give them no return on investment as there would be no exclusivity on a plant (milk thistle) that is so readily available worldwide. This is the issue with all natural remedies; no company or organisation will spend the money proving the effectiveness of natural remedies when there is no money to be made.

## Safety

Even though milk thistle comes from a plant, it is still a drug and can interact with other medicines. You should ask your pharmacist or doctor before taking milk thistle. If you are already taking milk thistle, you should still let your pharmacist or doctor know to ensure you have no contraindications or interactions. Milk thistle is safe for most people. Side effects are rare with upset stomach and mild diarrhoea being the most likely side effects. Rarer side effects can include rashes, headaches, heartburn, joint pain and impotence. Allergic reactions are rare but are still possible, especially in those already sensitive to plants in the same family as milk thistle including daisies, artichokes, kiwi, ragweeds and marigolds. Milk thistle may interact with some prescription medicines including blood thinners such as clopidogrel and warfarin, some anti-psychotic medication such as haloperidol, some anti-anxiety drugs such as diazepam and some cholesterol and cancer medication. Milk thistle can mimic the effects of oestrogen so should be avoided by some women prone to endometriosis or women suffering from breast, uterine or ovarian cancer. One constituent of milk thistle can inhibit an enzyme called beta-glucuronidase, which is involved in the activity of oral contraceptives. Therefore milk thistle may reduce the effectiveness of oral contraceptives. Milk thistle should be avoided during pregnancy and breast feeding as its safety is not proven. Milk thistle is not recommended for children.

### How to take Milk Thistle

Doses vary depending on what you are using milk thistle for but range from 160 to 800 mg daily. It's important to only take tablets that contain between 70% to 80% silymarin, which is the active ingredient of milk thistle. Although some people drink milk thistle as a tea, this doesn't seem to work well. Because natural remedies are not regulated as strictly as conventional pharmaceuticals, all preparations can vary in purity and quality so you should always check this before purchasing.

### A. Vogel Milk Thistle complex

A. Vogel's Milk Thistle Complex from Whelehan's pharmacy in Mullingar is a tablet form of Milk Thistle containing pure milk thistle. Each 250mg tablet contains the equivalent of 500mg Milk Thistle Complex tincture. Milk Thistle is one of the very first herbal products formulated by Alfred Vogel, one of Switzerland's best known naturopaths and A Vogel are one of the world's most trusted and well known producer of natural medicines with purity guaranteed. A. Vogel's Milk Thistle Complex also contains fresh plant extracts of Artichoke (anti-oxidant effects, eases nausea and indigestion and helps liver function), Dandelion (known for its positive effect on the liver) and peppermint (which can help ease indigestion and prevent spasms associated with irritable bowel syndrome).

### New rules for herbal medicines

New EU rules came into law from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2011 regarding the sale of herbal medicines. The new rules aim to protect consumers from potential adverse effects of herbal medicines. The new law means that herbal medicines have to adhere to certain guidelines or they will be taken off the shelves. As of May 2011, about 50 herbs have been taken off the market in the UK, including horny goat weed, the so called "natural Viagra". However many well known herbs such as Arnica, Echinacea and St John's Wort have passed the new regulations. The new rules mean herbal medicines must now be manufactured to the same standards as conventional medicines and must be proven safe before they can be sold. Therefore the new rules are good for consumers. The Irish Medical Board (IMB) have been registering herbal medicines, any herbal medicine not registered with the IMB by the manufacturer can no longer be sold. You can view which herbal medicines are now registered on the Irish Medical Board's website ([www.imb.ie](http://www.imb.ie)).

### Shortage of Milk Thistle

The new EU regulations on herbal and natural medicines mean that many common natural remedies are now difficult to purchase in Ireland. Many herbs and natural medicines that people took for granted are now not available. The main reason is that it is no longer viable for many companies to keep products on the market due to the cost of licencing the products due to the new EU rules. I have noticed that when trying to stock popular brands of herbal medicines like echinacea and milk thistle, companies say it is no longer viable for them to sell it in Ireland. Another problem is that Ireland is such a small market; many companies will not market the product here as the licencing costs are too high while the sales are too low due to our small population. Therefore you find that many herbal medicines available in the UK are no longer available here. Many of you will have noticed that milk thistle has been difficult to find over the last two years. Therefore in Whelehans we are delighted to have A Vogel Milk Thistle back on our shelves. Organically grown, A Vogel Milk Thistle is the premier milk thistle brand. The directions are one tablet twice daily.

Food Supplements should not be used as a substitute for a varied and balanced diet and healthy lifestyle.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to [www.whelehans.ie](http://www.whelehans.ie) or dial 04493 34591.