



Witch Hazel

SCIENTIFIC NAME
Hamamelis virginiana

FAMILY
Hamamelidaceae

Other Common Names

- Avellano de Bruja, Café du Diable, Hamamelis, Hamamélis, Hamamélis de Virginie, Hazel, Noisetier des Sorcières, Snapping Tobacco Wood, Spotted Elder, Virginian Witch Hazel, Winter Bloom.

Overview

Witch hazel is a deciduous, flowering shrub or small tree. It is native to Eastern North America ([86503,93896](#)). Witch hazel water (Hamamelis water, distilled witch hazel extract) is distilled from dried leaves, bark, and partially dormant twigs of witch hazel ([11](#)).

History

Witch hazel has been used traditionally by Native Americans for skin wounds and inflammatory skin conditions. The extract was produced by boiling the stems of the plant. The early Europeans in New England adopted the use of witch hazel. Witch hazel extract was first commercially produced in 1866 by Tomas Newton Dickinson, Sr. and the distillate was first prepared by Theron T. Pond in the 1840s ([86532,93895](#)).

People Use This For

Orally, witch hazel is used for diarrhea, mucus colitis, vomiting blood, coughing up blood, tuberculosis, colds, fevers, tumors and cancer.

Topically, witch hazel is used for acne, itching, skin inflammation, eye inflammation, skin injury, mucous membrane inflammation, vaginal dryness associated with menopause, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, bruises, insect bites, minor burns, and other skin irritations.

In manufacturing, witch hazel leaf extract, bark extract, and witch hazel water are used as astringents and hemostatics in preparations for insect bites, stings, teething, hemorrhoids, itching, irritations, and minor pain.

Safety

LIKELY SAFE ...when witch hazel water is used topically and appropriately ([272](#)).

POSSIBLY SAFE ...when used orally and appropriately ([12](#)). In high doses, tannins in witch hazel bark can cause liver damage ([8](#)). The volatile oil contains safrole, a known carcinogen, but in amounts too small for concern ([4](#)).

CHILDREN: POSSIBLY SAFE ...when applied topically and appropriately ([67795](#)).

PREGNANCY AND LACTATION: Insufficient reliable information available; avoid using.

Adverse Effects

General: Witch hazel contains tannins. The leaf contains 8% to 10% tannins, while the bark contains up to 12% ([512,10377,93894](#)). Orally, plants with at least 10% tannins can cause gastrointestinal disturbances, kidney damage, and necrotic conditions of the liver ([12](#)). Some evidence suggests that tannins might cause cancer; other evidence shows tannins may prevent it ([12](#)). Regular consumption of herbs with high tannin concentrations correlates with increased incidence of esophageal or nasal cancer ([12](#)).

Topically, witch hazel can cause contact dermatitis, redness, and burning ([6,67795,86505](#)).

- Dermatologic

Topically, witch hazel can cause contact dermatitis ([6,86505](#)). A small number of people develop redness or burning ([67795](#)).

- Gastrointestinal

Witch hazel contains tannins, with the leaf containing 8% to 10% tannins and the bark containing up to 12% tannins ([512,10377,93894](#)). Orally, plants with at least 10% tannins can cause gastrointestinal disturbances ([12](#)).

- Hepatic

Witch hazel contains tannins, with the leaf containing 8% to 10% tannins and the bark containing up to 12% tannins ([512,10377,93894](#)). Orally, plants with at least 10% tannins can cause necrotic conditions of the liver ([12](#)).

- Oncologic

Witch hazel contains tannins, with the leaf containing 8% to 10% tannins and the bark containing up to 12% tannins ([512,10377,93894](#)). Some evidence suggests that tannins might cause cancer; other evidence shows tannins may prevent it ([12](#)). Regular consumption of herbs with high tannin concentrations correlates with increased incidence of esophageal or nasal cancer ([12](#)).

- Renal

Witch hazel contains tannins, with the leaf containing 8% to 10% tannins and the bark containing up to 12% tannins ([512,10377,93894](#)). Orally, plants with at least 10% tannins can cause kidney damage ([12](#)).

Effectiveness

POSSIBLY EFFECTIVE

Hemorrhoids. Applying witch hazel water topically may help to temporarily relieve itching, discomfort, irritation, and burning associated with anorectal disorders ([272](#)).

Minor bleeding. Applying witch hazel bark, leaf, or water as a styptic seems to reduce minor bleeding ([7,8](#)).

Skin irritation. Applying witch hazel cream topically relieves mild skin irritation, although possibly less so than hydrocortisone ([11151,86531](#)). In children, use of a witch hazel ointment (Hametum, Spitzner Arzneimittel) appears to improve symptoms associated with skin injuries or dermatitis as effectively as a dexpanthenol ointment ([67795](#)).

POSSIBLY INEFFECTIVE

Eczema. Clinical research suggests that applying a topical cream containing witch hazel for 14 days does not improve symptoms of eczema in patients with moderately severe atopic eczema compared with placebo. Also, the witch hazel cream is less effective than a cream containing hydrocortisone ([86527](#)).

INSUFFICIENT RELIABLE EVIDENCE to RATE

Postmenopausal conditions. Preliminary clinical research shows that applying a moisturizing cream containing witch hazel distillate (Remifemin FeuchtCreme, Schaper-Brummer) 2.5 grams into the vagina daily for 7 days eliminates subjective feelings of vaginal dryness in 55% of women after the first application and 80% of women after 7 days of use, with all women experiencing an improvement in feelings of dryness compared to baseline ([96721](#)). The validity of these findings is limited by the lack of a control group.

More evidence is needed to rate witch hazel for this use.

Dosing & Administration

- **Adult**

Topical:

Skin irritation: A single application of a specific lotion containing 10% witch hazel distillate (pH5 Eucerin) has been used ([86531](#)).

Rectal:

Hemorrhoids: Suppositories, corresponding to 0.1-1 grams leaf and bark 1-3 times daily have been applied ([2](#)). Hamamelis water up to six times a day or after each bowel movement has been applied ([272](#)).

Postmenopausal conditions: For vaginal dryness, application of a specific moisturizing cream containing witch hazel distillate (Remifemin FeuchtCreme, Schaper-Brummer) 2.5 grams via an intravaginal applicator daily for 7 days has been used ([96721](#)).

- **Children**

Topical:

Skin irritation: A specific witch hazel ointment (Hametum, Spitzner Arzneimittel) applied several times daily has been used in children aged 2-11 years ([67795](#)).

- **Standardization & Formulation**

There is insufficient reliable information available about the standardization of witch hazel.

Interactions with Drugs

None known.

Interactions with Supplements

None known.

Interactions with Conditions

None known.

Interactions with Lab Tests

None known.

Overdose

There is insufficient reliable information about the toxicology of witch hazel.

Commercial Products Containing: Witch Hazel

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Pharmacokinetics

There is insufficient reliable information available about the pharmacokinetics of witch hazel.

Mechanism of Action

General: The applicable parts of witch hazel are the leaf and bark. The active constituents include gallotannins such as hamamelitannin, gallic acid, myricetin, quercetin, kaempferol, and catechol derivatives ([10377,93895](#)). The bark and leaves are both a source of volatile essential oils ([86512,93895](#)). The leaf contains 8-10% tannins ([512](#)). The bark contains up to 12% tannins ([10377,93894](#)). Steam distillation used for producing witch hazel water removes the tannins

(13). Thus, the astringent properties of witch hazel water result from its 14-15% alcohol content (13).

Anti-inflammatory effects: Witch hazel leaf and bark possess anti-inflammatory properties in animal models (10377,86525,86528). Constituents, such as hamamelitannin and galloyated proanthocyanidins have been shown to inhibit 5-lipoxygenase activity in laboratory research (86530). Also, tannins, applied topically to broken skin or mucous membranes induce protein precipitation. They tighten up superficial cell layers and shrink colloidal structures thereby causing capillaries to constrict. The decrease in vascular permeability approximates an anti-inflammatory effect (7). The anti-inflammatory effects of witch hazel might explain its anti-hemorrhoidal and skin-protective benefits.

Antimicrobial effects: Witch hazel leaf and bark possess astringent properties (10377). Antibacterial effects of witch hazel extract have been shown in laboratory research (59335,86516). The astringent activity of tannins causes an indirect antibacterial effect (7).

Anti-viral effects: In laboratory research, witch hazel bark extract had antiviral activity against influenza A virus and human papillomavirus (HPV) type 16. The bark extract inhibits various steps in the influenza A virus lifecycle, as well as the attachment of HPV. Tannins play a large role in these processes (93894).

Styptic effects: Witch hazel leaf and bark possess styptic properties (10377). Tannins, applied topically to broken skin or mucous membranes induce protein precipitation. They tighten up superficial cell layers and shrink colloidal structures thereby causing capillaries to constrict (7).

References

[See Monograph References](#)

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