



This monograph was prepared by The Ottawa Integrative Cancer Centre (OICC), in collaboration with the Complementary Medicine Education and Outcomes (CAMEO) Research Program. It is part of a series of monographs being developed to share results of a review of the research evidence related to common therapies and products used within cancer patient care.

The following monograph is designed to summarize evidence-based research and does not advocate for or against the use of a particular therapy. Every effort is made to ensure the information included in this monograph is accurate at the time it is published.

Please note that this monograph does not include an exhaustive list of all potential adverse events; individuals may experience unique side effects. The information in this monograph should not be interpreted as medical advice nor should it replace the advice of a licensed health care provider. Prior to using a new therapy or product, always consult a licensed health care provider.

For the safe use of natural health products, please consider the following:

- Consult a licensed health care provider prior to using a natural health product and make a plan to monitor its effectiveness and any side effects. This is particularly important for pregnant or breast-feeding women and people with serious medical conditions.
 - To help prevent interactions with your prescribed medication, ensure your health care provider is aware of any drugs or natural health products you may be using. Make sure to note all natural health ingredients listed in compound products.
 - Read and follow all instructions on the product label.
- If purchasing natural health products in Canada, look for Health Canada approved products. Look for Natural Product Number (NPN) or Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM) on the label to identify licensed products. Avoid internet pharmacies, as the quality of products cannot be guaranteed and products might not be licensed for sale through Health Canada. For more information, visit <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/about-appropos/cons-eng.php>

Please note: While the aim was to draw from the most extensive research, in some circumstances the information used was limited by the selection and caliber of available research studies. Full references are available in the corresponding full-length monographs found on the OICC website.

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Patient Resource: Breast Cancer

Black Cohosh



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Overview

Black cohosh is commonly used for the treatment of women's health concerns, including menopausal symptoms. Black cohosh root preparations may affect the activity of estrogen and serotonin in the body. There is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of black cohosh for hot flashes in breast cancer patients: it may work for some women and not others. Black cohosh should not be taken by people with liver conditions.

What is black cohosh?

The herb black cohosh (also known as *Actaea racemosa* and *Cimicifuga racemosa*) is a herb sold as a natural health product.

What is black cohosh used for?

Extracts from the black cohosh root are used to manage hot flashes related to hormone therapy or menopausal symptoms by women living with breast cancer and breast cancer survivors.

Does black cohosh work?

Evidence is mixed for the effectiveness of black cohosh in the management of hot flashes in breast cancer patients. In studies involving women with breast cancer (some of whom were taking tamoxifen), black cohosh reduced the number of hot flashes per day, and the hot flash severity between 15-56% from the study start: however, these outcomes also improved when women were given a placebo (sugar pill). It is not clear how much of the benefit of black cohosh is due to its effect on the body, or due to the psychological effect of expecting benefit, since women receiving placebo also had sizeable improvements in hot flashes. The "placebo effect" as it is known, is an important factor in hot flash research. One study found that 46% of women taking black cohosh experienced no hot flashes, while there was no reduction amongst women not taking black cohosh. The severity of hot flashes was also decreased in the black cohosh group compared to the control group. It is possible that black cohosh may work for some women and not others.

How does black cohosh work?

While the way in which black cohosh affects menopausal symptoms remains unclear, it is thought to have an estrogen- and/or serotonin-like effect on the brain, affecting the part of the brain responsible for causing hot flashes. Black cohosh may also mimic the effect of estrogen on bone. However, it does not appear to have an estrogen- like effect in breast or uterine tissue.

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Patient Resource: Breast Cancer

Black Cohosh

What are some possible side effects of black cohosh?

Side effects are usually minimal and mild in severity. The most common side effects include gastrointestinal upset, anxiety, irritability and mood changes.

Is black cohosh safe?

There has been some concern that black cohosh may cause liver damage, however this is based on a handful of single reports and has not been seen in any large studies. Therefore, patients with a pre-existing liver condition should use caution when taking black cohosh. Black cohosh does not seem to have negative effects on any other health condition.

Note: If you are allergic to black cohosh or other members of the Ranunculaceae (buttercup or crowfoot) family, you should not use black cohosh. If you experience symptoms of allergy, discontinue use and seek advice from a health care provider.

Caution: black cohosh is not the same as blue cohosh or white cohosh. The blue and white plants do not have the same effect as black cohosh and may not be safe to consume.

Safety specific to hormone-sensitive cancers

Black cohosh showed no estrogenic effects in one study of women with breast cancer and in 17 studies of healthy women. Black cohosh did not increase blood estrogen, progesterone, luteinizing hormone

(LH) or follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) in 16 of 17 studies. In one study of women taking fertility medication (Clomid) to enhance ovulation, increased levels of estrogen were associated with black cohosh; however, this was not found in studies of healthy women. Black cohosh does not have estrogenic effects on uterine or breast tissue.

Are there interactions with black cohosh?

There are no known potential interactions between black cohosh and hormonal therapies (anti-estrogen) such as tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors, commonly used treatments in breast cancer.

If you choose to use black cohosh:

Research suggests that 40 mg of black cohosh taken daily in pill form is most likely to provide benefits to menopausal symptoms. If you decide to take black cohosh, you should take it for at least 3 months, in consultation with a licensed health care provider, in order to determine whether it may be beneficial for you.

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