

Willow Bark(Salixspecies)

Common Names: European willow, white willow bark (S. alba).

Location: Native to Europe, North America, northern Asia, and much of Africa.

Description: The willow is usually a low-growing deciduous tree. Under optimum growing conditions, however, it grows to a height of eighty feet, bearing green, tapering leaves and catkins in spring. Almost 2,000 years ago, the Greek physician Dioscorides recommended “willow leaves, mashed with a little pepper and drunk with wine” to treat lower back pain. During the Middle Ages, willow bark was used in Europe to reduce fevers and relieve pain. In 1899, the Bayer Company in Germany introduced a drug composed of a synthetic chemical compound similar to the active compound found in willow bark. Originally used as a brand name, Bayer’s term for its product later became one of the best-known generic medicine names—*aspirin*.

Properties: Bark is stripped from two-to-five year old trees in spring for medicinal use.

Uses: Like *aspirin*, willow bark is a proven painkiller, but without many of *aspirin*’s side effects. The analgesic actions of willow are typically slower acting but last longer than standard *aspirin* products. As with *aspirin*, uses for willow bark include fever, colds, minor infections, acute and chronic rheumatic disorders, mild headaches, and pain caused by inflammation. Willow bark is also high in tannins, suggesting that it may be of some use in gastrointestinal disorders. Benefits of willow bark for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: dry mouth, headache, migraine, osteoarthritis, toothache, lower back pain and osteoporosis.

Doses: Willow Bark is available as capsules and salicin tablets, and in various formulations designed specifically for migraines. In Native American medicine, willow bark is used to reduce sexual desire. Chronic use of willow bark may result in diminished sexual interest, although it does not affect physical aspects of sexual performance in either men or women.

Warnings: If you have had any type of allergic reaction to *aspirin* or other salicylates, you should not use willow bark. Use this herb only under the supervision of a health-care professional if you are pregnant or nursing. Do not take it in combination with *aspirin*. Long-term use of willow is not advisable. Do not give willow bark to a child under sixteen years of age who has symptoms of flu, chickenpox, or any other type of viral infection. As with *aspirin*, there may be a risk of developing a rare but serious ailment called Reye’s syndrome.