Can Frankincense Benefit People With Cancer?



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Some research suggests that frankincense oil has anti-inflammatory and anticancer properties. However, more research is necessary to learn the short- and long-term effects.

Known to some as the “king of oils,” frankincense comes from the sap of trees in the Boswellia genus, like the Boswellia sacra tree. These trees are in Middle Eastern countries, such as Oman and Yemen, and African countries, such as Somalia and Ethiopia.

Some people think the sap had certain medicinal properties, making it a staple in many herbal and alternative therapies. Below, read about whether frankincense has any beneficial effects on cancer, other potential benefits, and the risks.

Does frankincense help with cancer?

According to a 2022 review, researchers have been investigating frankincense’s therapeutic potential, particularly its anti-inflammatory and anticancer properties.

Frankincense may help to regulate immune cells and control cell signaling, which is responsible for preventing cancer cells from growing and spreading.

Research in the review suggests frankincense may benefit brain tumor-related edema but does not reduce the size of brain tumors. The authors conclude that more studies are necessary to learn frankincense’s full therapeutic potential and effects on other tumor types.

A 2024 clinical trial tested boswellic acids — a component of frankincense oil — on 18 people before surgery for breast cancer. Participants took 2,400 milligrams (mg) of frankincense extract for 5 to 56 days before surgery.

The researchers found that frankincense significantly reduced breast cancer cell growth and caused no serious side effects. However, they conclude that more research is necessary.

Some research has also looked at frankincense's effect on cancer-related symptoms.

For example, a 2018 case study suggests that frankincense may benefit cancer-related fatigue, while a 2022 review suggests it may help people undergoing cancer treatments, like chemotherapy, feel calmer.

Can frankincense treat cancer?

Although current research suggests that frankincense's properties may have some benefits for certain cancers, it's important to remember that no studies have proven that frankincense can treat cancer.

Frankincense may have some therapeutic potential and anticancer properties, but more research is necessary to understand the extent of this, and the short- and long-term side effects.

Other benefits of frankincense

Traditional medicine has used frankincense for years to help with various conditions. The boswellic acids in frankincense have anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, and pain-relieving properties that may offer some therapeutic benefits.

According to a 2022 review, clinical trials suggest that frankincense may help with the following:

- arthritis
- multiple sclerosis
- skin conditions, like eczema and psoriasis

- asthma
- gingivitis and oral health

Some people may also use frankincense in aromatherapy to help with anxiety, stress, and general well-being.

Risks and side effects of frankincense

Applying undiluted essential oils, like frankincense oil, to your skin may cause inflammation, irritation, or allergic reactions.

The Food and Drug Administration lists the gum resin of Boswellia as Generally Recognized As Safe, so you may see it as a food additive in certain products.

However, it isn't yet clear how ingesting frankincense oil or its extracts may affect you in the short- or long-term.

You should always speak with a healthcare professional before ingesting essential oils or extracts, especially if you are currently pregnant, breastfeeding, or taking any medications.

How to use frankincense

If you're interested in adding frankincense to your treatment, reach out to your doctor. They can help determine whether this is the best option for you and advise you on potential next steps.

Although some sources may recommend ingesting a small amount of frankincense with food, this isn't a medically sound approach. You shouldn't ingest any essential oil.

When applying essential oils to your skin, dilute one to two drops of frankincense oil with a carrier oil, such as coconut or jojoba oil. Carrier oils help reduce the potency of essential oils to prevent your skin from having an adverse reaction.

You can also diffuse the oil into the air to get potential aromatic benefits. If you have a diffuser, add a few drops and allow it to disperse. If

you don’t have a diffuser, you can add a few drops to a piece of tissue or cotton nearby.

Learn aromatherapy’s uses and benefits.

Other treatments for cancer

Cancer treatment usually involves a plan that you work out with your oncologist and other doctors. Depending on the stage, grade, and type of your cancer, these treatments may include:

- surgery to remove any cancerous tissue and prevent the cancer from spreading
- chemotherapy drugs to kill the rapidly dividing cancer cells
- radiation therapy to kill cancer cells in targeted areas
- hormone therapy to slow or stop the growth of cancers that rely on hormones
- immunotherapy to help your immune system fight the cancer

The bottom line

The short- and long-term effects of using frankincense are still unclear. Although some researchers suggests that frankincense may have therapeutic potential, more research is necessary to fully assess the potential benefits and risks.

Frankincense oil and extracts may help people undergoing cancer treatment to feel calmer and may help with certain symptoms, like fatigue or swelling. However, frankincense can’t treat cancer.

Talk with your doctor before adding frankincense to your treatment plan. They can help ensure that the essential oil or its extract won’t interfere with any other medications or therapies you may be using. They can also help you find a dosage that will work for you.

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How we reviewed this article: