

MILK THISTLE

Milk thistle is one of the best-known and most often used herbs for humans and pets with liver disease. Only a few conventional medications are available for this condition. Supplementing with milk thistle may be useful for pets with liver problems.

The scientific name for the milk thistle plant is *Silybum marianum*. Milk thistle products come from the seeds. The active ingredient is called "silymarin." Silymarin appears to function by fighting off toxins that try to bind to the liver. It also seems to aid the body in making proteins and so may help the sick liver rebuild itself. Silymarin may also function as an antioxidant by scavenging harmful free-radical molecules and improving liver cells.

Sometimes, chemicals harm the liver and make it inflamed. Silymarin appears to help the liver by reducing damage done by the chemicals. It also has been found effective in treating poisoning by the death cap mushroom, *Amanita phalloides*. Milk thistle is recommended as part of the therapy for a variety of conditions affecting the liver in dogs and cats. These conditions include but are not limited to:

**Cholangiohepatitis/cholecystitis*. These are inflammatory or infectious diseases involving the liver and gallbladder.

**Hepatic lipidosis*—another name for "fatty liver disease."

**Hyperadrenocorticism*—also called "Cushing's disease."

**Liver cancer*.

**Toxicity*. This problem may arise from a number of medications, such as phenobarbital, corticosteroids, acetaminophen, and various chemotherapy medications; insecticides and pesticides; or mushroom poisoning.

Because of its liver support, milk thistle is often used when the dog or cat becomes too ill or toxic for the body to keep the liver healthy. The herb can also be used when medications that could be toxic to the liver are given to the pet.

In humans, treatment produces modest improvement in symptoms of chronic liver disease, such as nausea, weakness, loss of appetite, fatigue, and pain. As measured by blood tests, liver enzymes frequently improve, and if a liver biopsy is performed, there may be improvements on the cellular level. Some studies have shown a reduction in death rate among patients with serious liver disease.

Milk thistle is a safe supplement with no known toxicity. Very large doses may cause loose stools because of excessive bile production. In humans, mild gastrointestinal upset is sometimes seen.