



## Hoxsey Herbal Treatment

**Other common name(s):** Hoxsey method, Hoxsey treatment, Hoxsey herbs, Hoxsey herbal therapy, Hoxsey formula

**Scientific/medical name(s):** none

### Description

The Hoxsey herbal treatment is a regimen that includes the use of two types of herbal mixtures: a “brown tonic” to be taken by mouth and a paste, salve, or yellow powder for external use. Both the paste and the powder are caustic, meaning they can burn the skin (see *Cancer Salves*).

### Overview

Available scientific evidence does not support claims that the Hoxsey herbal treatment is effective in treating cancer, and there have been no clinical trials of the treatment published in conventional medical journals. In some animal studies, a few of the herbs contained in the Hoxsey formula were studied separately and showed some anticancer activity. It is not known whether the combination of herbs taken by mouth has harmful effects. The paste made for external application can severely burn, scar, and disfigure the skin.

### How is it promoted for use?

The Hoxsey herbal treatment is specifically promoted to treat people with cancer. People who use the tonic claim that it removes toxins from the body, strengthens the immune system, and enhances the body’s ability to absorb and excrete, or get rid of, tumors. The external treatment is used to treat skin cancer. It is supposed to keep cancer from spreading and help destroy cancer cells. Those who use the Hoxsey treatment say that it restores the body's chemistry to a normal state.

## What does it involve?

The herbal tonic for internal use contains a combination of supplements and herbs that may include pokeweed, burdock root, licorice, barberry, buckthorn bark, stillingia root, red clover, prickly ash bark, potassium iodide, and cascara. The components depend on when it was made, who it was made for, and the clinic in which it was made. The pastes or salves for external use may contain antimony trisulfide, zinc chloride, and blood root, and the powder consists of arsenic sulfide, sulfur, and talc. The external preparation is rubbed directly onto tumors. Internal and external dosages vary depending on the patient and whether the tumor is inside the body or on the skin. The Hoxsey herbal treatment is no longer legal in the United States, although it can be obtained through clinics in Mexico. Adapted versions of the formula are being used by some naturopathic practitioners in the United States.

In addition to the herbs and other ingredients described above, the Hoxsey treatment now also includes antiseptic douches and washes, laxative tablets, and nutritional supplements. Food restrictions are now part of the treatment as well, and patients undergoing this treatment may not be allowed pork, vinegar, tomatoes, pickles, carbonated drinks, alcohol, bleached flour, sugar, and most salt.

## What is the history behind it?

The Hoxsey herbal treatment is one of the oldest alternative cancer treatments in the United States. Its controversial history dates back to the 1920s, when Harry Hoxsey, who had no medical training, began marketing a mixture of herbs that he believed would treat cancer. Hoxsey claimed that his great grandfather, John Hoxsey, developed the first version of the herbal formula in 1840 when he noticed a tumor that had developed on one of his horse's legs. The animal began eating some of the wild plants growing in the meadow, and within a short time the tumor disappeared. John Hoxsey gathered the herbs and mixed them with old home remedies used for cancer.

Harry's father, a veterinarian, was the first to use the herbal formula to treat people with cancer. Harry, however, was the one who attracted fame and fortune through self-promotion, publicity, and sensational claims. He even conducted public healing sessions using his herbal concoction. Hoxsey opened his first clinic in Taylorville, Illinois, in the 1920s, and at one point operated clinics in 17 states. He claimed that at their peak his clinics treated tens of thousands of cancer patients every year. Hoxsey was convicted and fined numerous times for practicing medicine without a license and moved his clinics from state to state to avoid legal problems.

In 1936, Hoxsey opened a clinic in Dallas, Texas, that became one of the largest privately owned cancer centers in the world. In 1949, Hoxsey sued the editor of the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* for libel and slander after the journal called him a fraud. Hoxsey won the case, but the judge awarded him only \$1.

By 1960, after battling Hoxsey for a decade, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) finally banned the sale of the Hoxsey herbal treatment in the United States and

forced Hoxsey to close all clinics in the United States. In 1963, one of Hoxsey's nurses set up a clinic in Tijuana, Mexico. Just before her death in 1999, the clinic was taken over by her sister and still operates today. Hoxsey himself was found to have prostate cancer in 1967. When he did not respond to his own treatment, Hoxsey underwent conventional surgery. He died 7 years later.

## What is the evidence?

Available scientific evidence does not support claims that the Hoxsey herbal treatment has any value in the treatment of cancer in humans. In 1946, the National Cancer Institute reviewed 77 case reports of Hoxsey's patients and concluded that none of them met the criteria for scientific evaluation.

Experts from The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center have reviewed all 4 published human studies of the Hoxsey herbal treatment. One study was published in a pamphlet provided by the Tijuana clinic and simply contains a description of 9 patients who received the treatment. It concluded that the treatment is effective, even though most of the Hoxsey-treated patients received standard cancer treatment in addition to the Hoxsey treatment. Seven additional cases were reviewed in a book, which concludes that patients "got well when they weren't supposed to"—that is, they had a dismal prognosis but were cured by the Hoxsey treatment. The cases described in the book, however, include some in which the cancer was not confirmed by biopsy and several in which patients also received conventional treatment. A study published in the *Journal of Naturopathic Medicine* involved 39 people with various types of cancer who took the Hoxsey herbal treatment. Ten patients died after an average of 15 months, and 23 never completed the study. Six patients claimed to be disease-free after 4 years. A study reporting outcomes of 149 patients registering at the Hoxsey clinic during the first 3 months of 1992 was published in 2001 in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. Seventeen patients were still alive, 68 had died, and information regarding the remaining 64 was not available. The researchers concluded that the value of the treatment could not be evaluated because follow-up for so many patients was incomplete. None of these 4 studies contain convincing evidence of effectiveness.

According to a 1990 report from the U.S. Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, the National Advisory Cancer Council studied many of Hoxsey's patient records and learned that biopsies were not performed on most of the patients, so there was no confirmation that they actually had cancer. In a separate review, the National Cancer Institute investigated 400 patients who were reported as cured by Hoxsey. Patients or their families were interviewed, and all records were carefully reviewed. These patients fell into 3 groups: those who had been treated, but were not confirmed to have had cancer; those who had received successful conventional cancer treatment before seeing Hoxsey; and those who had cancer and had died of it or were still alive with evidence of cancer. Out of the 400 cases, not 1 case of a Hoxsey cure could be documented.

To collect some reliable information, a carefully controlled study of the Hoxsey tonic was performed on mice with tumors. There was no difference in tumor size and growth

between the treated and untreated mice. The main ingredient in the tonic, potassium iodide, had been tested already and found to be useless in cancer treatment.

In some animal studies, a few of the individual herbs contained in the Hoxsey treatment showed some anticancer activity. Further studies are needed to determine whether the results apply to humans.

## **Are there any possible problems or complications?**

*Most such supplements have not been tested to find out if they interact with medicines, foods, or other herbs and supplements. Even though some reports of interactions and harmful effects may be published, full studies of interactions and effects are not often available. Because of these limitations, any information on ill effects and interactions below should be considered incomplete.*

Some of the ingredients in the internal formula, such as buckthorn, can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, anxiety, and trembling. Cascara can also cause diarrhea. Pokeweed is a poisonous plant that can cause side effects such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and heart block (a blockage of the electrical impulses that stimulate the heart to contract), and has caused deaths in children. Red clover may increase the risk of bleeding for people who take blood-thinning medications such as warfarin (Coumadin). It also has estrogen-like activity, which means it should be avoided by women with estrogen-positive breast tumors. Taking iodine in large amounts over a long period of time can cause inflamed salivary glands, skin outbreaks, and impotence. The paste made for external use can severely burn, scar, and disfigure the skin.

Interactions with other drugs may occur. For example, potassium iodide can cause problems in those taking lithium or blood-thinning medications. Potential interactions between the Hoxsey herbs and other drugs and herbs should be considered. Some of these combinations may be dangerous. Always tell your doctor and pharmacist about any herbs you are taking.

People with allergies to any of the ingredients may experience severe reactions to the internal or external formulas. If hives, rashes, or shortness of breath develop, stop taking the herbs and seek medical attention immediately.

Women who are pregnant or breast-feeding should not use this treatment in any form. Relying on this type of treatment alone and avoiding or delaying conventional medical care for cancer may have serious health consequences.

## Additional resources

### More information from your American Cancer Society

The following information on complementary and alternative therapies may also be helpful to you. These materials may be found on our Web site ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)) or ordered from our toll-free number (1-800-ACS-2345).

Guidelines for Using Complementary and Alternative Therapies

Dietary Supplements: How to Know What Is Safe

The ACS Operational Statement on Complementary and Alternative Methods of Cancer Management

Complementary and Alternative Methods for Cancer Management

Placebo Effect

Learning About New Ways to Treat Cancer

Learning About New Ways to Prevent Cancer

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**Note:** This information may not cover all possible claims, uses, actions, precautions, side effects or interactions. It is not intended as medical advice, and should not be relied upon as a substitute for consultation with your doctor, who is familiar with your medical situation.

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