

Is Frankincense Good for Your Health?

By Lisa Bain, *Good Housekeeping*



You may think of frankincense as that woody, spicy scent powering many perfumes—or, if you're familiar with the Bible, as one of the gifts that the three Wise Men brought to celebrate the birth of Jesus. For over a thousand years, frankincense has been used not only in religious ceremonies but also to treat various health conditions. And today, there are many alternative health claims that frankincense can help with a wide variety of problems. But are there actual health benefits to using frankincense? We found out.

First, what exactly is frankincense?

Frankincense is made from the resin (dried sap) of the *Boswellia* tree, which mainly grows in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The resin is harvested by cutting through the bark of the tree, and then letting the sap flow out in “tears” that are gathered. Within this resin is something called boswellic acid, which some research has shown to have anti-inflammatory and other health-boosting properties. For instance, a 2002 study in Germany found that compounds from the resin may help with chronic inflammation. And in a 2020 study, researchers at the Institute of Pharmacy of Friedrich Schiller University Jena in Germany have figured out the molecular mechanism of boswellic acid, which should eventually open the door to a greater understanding of its potential anti-inflammatory effects.

Note: People self-treat with frankincense using teas, supplements, and essential oil, but remember, for any of the following health conditions, it's critical to be under a physician's care.

Here's what the research shows about its impact on various ailments:

Can frankincense help with arthritis?

Osteoarthritis, a painful condition that often affects the knees, hips, and hands, is the most common type of arthritis, according to the CDC. It affects more women than men, tends to get worse with age, and is aggravated by obesity. It's thought by many to be caused by chronic inflammation. There are many reports that frankincense can help ease the pain of osteoarthritis, and there is some research of supplements containing Boswellia to back that up—but it's important to note that the studies were small and conducted only over a short time. Another review also found that Boswellia might be helpful for osteoarthritis, but said that while it could be “a valuable addition” to treating osteoarthritis of the knee, the evidence wasn't strong enough to suggest a change in clinical recommendations

Could frankincense help keep your gums healthy?

Historically in Chinese medicine, one of the uses for certain compounds of frankincense was to treat mouth and gum complaints, according to the American Botanical Council. And a small 2011 study in India found that frankincense may have the potential to prevent oral pathogens (bacteria or viruses that can cause disease) and infections, given the antimicrobial properties of boswellic acid. This study concluded that there's a potential use in mouthwash to combat oral pathogens, though more research is needed. Another small study from 2011 that tested frankincense extract showed that it may reduce gingivitis (and inflammation-related gum disease).

Does frankincense treat gut problems?

There are many claims about the power of frankincense to ease all those annoying digestive issues, from diarrhea to more serious problems. Some research is there — but it's scant and not that recent. For example, a small study conducted in 2001 that compared Boswellia to a specific NSAID found that they were comparatively effective in relieving symptoms of Crohn's disease, an inflammatory bowel disease. And a small, limited-duration study in 2007 showed that Boswellia may be more effective than a placebo in treating chronic diarrhea. Another small study from 2001 showed some promise in using Boswellia in easing the discomfort of chronic colitis, another inflammatory disease—this time in the colon—that can cause diarrhea, abdominal pain, and bloody stools. Again, new and additional research is needed.

Could frankincense help with asthma?

Asthma is a respiratory condition that can range from minor to life-threatening. During an asthma attack, the airways narrow and swell up, making breathing more difficult. A small study in India in 2012 showed that certain compounds of Boswellia reduced inflammation, resulting in less bronchial restriction in patients with bronchial asthma. **Again: a small study, so more research is needed.**