

Black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*) – Risk of liver problems

What is Black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*)?

Black cohosh is a herbal medicine that has traditionally been used for the relief of joint aches, muscle pain and neuralgia. Modern day use of black cohosh is most commonly for treating menopausal symptoms (such as hot flushes, night sweats, joint aches, headaches, insomnia, palpitations).

What is the current safety issue?

The current concerns arise from reports of liver problems associated with black cohosh. The Commission on Human Medicines and the Herbal Medicines Advisory Committee, having reviewed the available data on liver reactions with black cohosh, have advised that these data support a causal association between black cohosh and the risk of liver disorders.

Upon their advice warnings are being added to the labels for all black cohosh products and the Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is working with the relevant Marketing Authorisation holders and the herbal sector to ensure people are fully informed about this potential risk.

How many individuals in the UK are taking black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*)?

It is unclear exactly how many individuals in the UK may be taking black cohosh. It was estimated that in 2004 a total of 9 million treatment days were purchased in 2004.

How many reports of liver problems have been received through the Yellow Card scheme?

Up to 31 May 2006, a total of 31 reports of suspected adverse reactions associated with black cohosh have been received through the Yellow Card Scheme. Of these 22 have been reports of liver reactions - ranging in severity from abnormal liver function (15 people) to various forms of hepatitis (6 people) including one case of hepatic failure. Generally the individuals recovered or were recovering after stopping black cohosh.

What should I do if I am taking black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*)?

Individuals taking black cohosh who are feeling well need not take any action. Anyone treated with black cohosh who is concerned or unwell should see their doctor. Symptoms of liver problems include pain on the right side of the stomach just below the ribs, unexplained nausea (feeling sick), "flu-like" symptoms, unusual tiredness, dark urine and yellowing of eyes or skin (jaundice).

I am about to start taking black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*), is there anything else I need to know?

Anyone who has previously experienced any liver complaint or any other serious health complaint is advised not to take black cohosh without first talking to their doctor.

What is being done to investigate the safety of black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*)?

The CHM, HMA and MHRA are keeping the safety of black cohosh under close review and any new information will be evaluated and, if necessary, new guidance will be issued.