HEALTH BASICS

Chamomile

Chamomile is an herb used in teas, supplements, and skin products.

WHAT IT IS
An herb used in teas, extracts, creams, and supplements

WHERE IT COMES UP
Tea aisles, supplement labels, skin products, and herbal remedies

WHY IT MATTERS
Can cause allergies and interact with some medicines

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or a proven treatment for most conditions

WHO TO ASK
Pharmacist, primary care clinician, or allergy specialist

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No routine test; laboratories can test products for ingredients

Overview

Chamomile is the common name for several daisy-like plants. German chamomile, Matricaria recutita , and Roman chamomile, Chamaemelum nobile , are the types most often sold for health-related use. They are different plants and may not have identical effects.

Dried chamomile flowers are commonly brewed as tea. Chamomile is also sold as a liquid extract, capsule, essential oil, mouth rinse, cream, or ointment. The ingredients and strength can differ widely between products.

Chamomile is not a disease or a diagnosis. It is an herb used as a food, cosmetic ingredient, and complementary health product. "Complementary" means it is used alongside standard medical care rather than as a replacement for it.

People may use chamomile for relaxation, sleep, anxiety, indigestion, mouth irritation, or skin problems. Research has examined some of these uses, but the evidence is limited or inconsistent. A product being described as traditional or natural does not show that it treats a medical condition.

How it works

Chamomile flowers contain several plant chemicals, including apigenin and compounds called flavonoids. In laboratory studies, some of these substances affect pathways involved in inflammation, muscle activity, and signalling within the brain.

Apigenin can attach to certain brain receptors involved in calming signals. This has led researchers to study chamomile for anxiety and sleep. However, a laboratory effect does not prove that drinking chamomile tea or taking a supplement will produce a useful clinical effect.

Chamomile preparations used on the skin have also been studied for possible anti-inflammatory effects. "Anti-inflammatory" means reducing processes involved in redness, swelling, or irritation. The amount reaching the skin depends on the product, and chamomile itself can cause an allergic skin reaction.

The way chamomile is prepared matters. Tea, concentrated extracts, capsules, creams, and essential oils are not interchangeable. A cup of tea does not contain the same amount or mixture of plant chemicals as a concentrated supplement.

Why it matters for your health

Chamomile tea in ordinary food amounts is generally considered likely to be safe for most adults. Less is known about the safety of concentrated extracts, long-term supplement use, or products containing chamomile essential oil.

Evidence does not establish chamomile as a reliable treatment for insomnia, anxiety disorders, digestive diseases, eczema, or other medical conditions. Small studies may suggest possible benefits for particular uses, but results cannot always be applied to every product or every person.

Chamomile may matter if you have an allergy to plants in the daisy family, also called the Asteraceae or Compositae family. This group includes ragweed, chrysanthemums, marigolds, and daisies. Being allergic to one plant does not guarantee a chamomile allergy, but it may increase concern about a reaction.

It may also matter if you take medicines. Interactions have been reported with warfarin, a medicine that reduces blood clotting, and ciclosporin, a medicine that suppresses the immune system. Information about other interactions is incomplete. Concentrated products may be more concerning than occasional tea, but a safe amount cannot be assumed from that difference.

There is not enough dependable information to confirm the safety of medicinal amounts during pregnancy or breastfeeding. This uncertainty is especially relevant to supplements and essential oils rather than chamomile used as a minor food ingredient.

What can go wrong

Chamomile can be involved in several specific problems or situations:

If a rash, stomach upset, unusual drowsiness, or other non-severe problem begins after using chamomile, stop the product and arrange routine advice from a pharmacist or clinician. Bring the package or a photograph of the full label.

Contact a clinician promptly if you take warfarin, ciclosporin, sedatives, or several prescription medicines and have started a concentrated chamomile product. Unexpected bruising, prolonged bleeding, blood in urine or stool, or a marked change in alertness needs prompt medical assessment.

Call emergency services for trouble breathing, throat tightness, fainting, or rapidly increasing swelling of the lips, tongue, or face. These can be signs of anaphylaxis.

- Allergic contact dermatitis: an itchy, red, or blistering rash where a cream, rinse, or other product touched the skin
- Immediate allergy: hives, facial swelling, wheezing, or, rarely, anaphylaxis, which is a severe whole-body allergic reaction
- Eye irritation: chamomile products used near the eyes may cause irritation or allergic conjunctivitis
- Medicine interactions: possible changes in bleeding risk, sedation, or medicine levels in the body
- Product-quality problems: contamination, incorrect plant species, or an ingredient amount that differs from the label

What you can do

There is no routine blood test that shows whether chamomile is safe for you or likely to help. A clinician may arrange allergy testing when your history suggests a true allergic reaction, but testing is not needed for everyone who has used chamomile.

Before buying or using a product, check the label for:

Ask a pharmacist to review the product if you take prescription medicines, have a known plant allergy, are pregnant or breastfeeding, or are preparing for a procedure. Do not stop a prescribed medicine in order to use chamomile.

Keep a simple record of why you are using it, how much the label directs you to use, and any changes you notice. This can help separate a possible effect from normal changes in sleep,

stress, digestion, or skin irritation.

Independent quality certification may provide some assurance that a supplement contains the listed ingredients and has been checked for selected contaminants. It does not prove that the product works or that it is safe for you.

Do not swallow chamomile essential oil unless the product is specifically made and labelled for oral use. Keep concentrated products away from children. In the United States, contact Poison Control after an accidental ingestion; elsewhere, use your local poisons information service.

- The plant's scientific name
- The part used, such as the flower
- Whether it is tea, extract, essential oil, cream, or capsule
- Other herbs, medicines, fragrances, or inactive ingredients
- A lot number and expiry date

Common questions

Does chamomile tea treat insomnia?

Evidence is not strong enough to establish chamomile tea as a treatment for insomnia. A warm, caffeine-free drink may be part of a relaxing bedtime routine, but persistent sleep difficulty can have many causes and deserves routine assessment.

Is chamomile the same as ragweed?

No. They are different plants, but both belong to the same broad plant family. Some people with ragweed allergy may also react to chamomile.

Is German chamomile better than Roman chamomile?

There is not enough direct evidence to say that one is better for general health use. Check which species was used because research on one species may not apply to the other.

Can chamomile replace anxiety or sleep medicine?

No reliable evidence supports replacing prescribed treatment with chamomile. Abruptly stopping some anxiety or sleep medicines can cause withdrawal or worsening symptoms. Discuss any planned change with the prescribing clinician.

Is chamomile safe for babies?

Safety information for infants is limited, and herbal teas can displace breast milk or formula. Honey-containing products also carry a botulism risk for children under 12 months. Ask a child-health clinician before giving an infant chamomile.

Can chamomile be put directly in the eyes?

It should not be used as a homemade eye wash. Non-sterile liquids can introduce germs, and chamomile can cause irritation or allergy. Eye pain, light sensitivity, vision changes, or significant swelling needs prompt assessment.

Sources

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. "Chamomile." Herbs at a Glance
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- National Library of Medicine. "Chamomile." LiverTox: Clinical and Research Information on Drug-Induced Liver Injury
- National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements. "Dietary Supplements: What You Need to Know."
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "Dietary Supplements."