



# ESSIAC

## WHAT IS ESSIAC?

Essiac is a tea made from four herbs. A Canadian nurse named Rene Caisse developed it in 1922. She said the formula originally came from an Ojibwa Indian medicine man. She named it after the backward spelling of her own last name, Caisse. The 4 main herbs in Essiac are burdock root (*Arctium lappa*), Indian or Chinese rhubarb (*Rheum palmatum*), sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), and the inner bark of slippery elm (*Ulmus fulva* or *Ulmus rubra*).

**Burdock root** is used in folk medicine to improve digestion, to clean the blood, to increase urination, or as a laxative. Laboratory studies have shown some anti-tumor effects. **Rhubarb** can be a strong laxative. **Sheep sorrel** is claimed to be effective against cancer. **Slippery elm** has a long, safe history in alleviating sore throats. It is used in many herbal cough drops or teas for sore throats.

Caisse used the herbal tea to treat patients with cancer. Some of them claimed to be cured; others said the herbal tea eased their pain. In 1938 in Canada, a bill was introduced to authorize Caisse to treat cancer. Instead, the legislature passed a bill that required her to disclose the formula for Essiac. She refused to do so. In 1977, she sold the formula to a Canadian corporation, Resperin.

Essiac is widely available as an herbal health food, without any specific health claims. There are several different versions of the product. There are also many claims and counterclaims about authenticity. In 2000, the US Federal Trade Commission filed a complaint against a distributor of Essiac for misleading health claims on several web sites.

## HOW IS ESSIAC USED?

Many providers of Essiac claim that the only correct way to use the product is to

drink a freshly brewed tea, one to three times a day on an empty stomach. Essiac is available in liquid form but is also sometimes sold as a mixture of herbs to be boiled and steeped by the user, or in capsule form.

Caisse reportedly had several variations of the recipe to treat different forms of cancer. Some versions of Essiac have more than the original four ingredients. The added ingredients are supposed to enhance the product's effectiveness and improve its taste. Two common additions are watercress and Pau d'arco. Yellow dock or curly dock are sometimes used instead of sheep's sorrel.

Advocates of Essiac suggest using it only if it is made in small batches with the freshest possible ingredients. They also disagree with using Essiac pills, capsules, or tea bags.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ESSIAC?

Proponents of Essiac claim that it strengthens the immune system, improves appetite, relieves pain, and improves overall quality of life. They also claim that it shrinks tumors and prolongs the lives of people with cancer.

## WHY DO PEOPLE WITH HIV USE ESSIAC?

All of the claims that Essiac can help people with HIV seem to have come from Dr. Gary Glum, a chiropractor. In 1988 he wrote "Calling of an Angel," a biography of Rene Caisse. Glum claims to have treated several AIDS patients with Essiac with good results. No report of this study was published.

## WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

There are no recorded side effects from the use of Essiac. In 1982, the Canadian Department of National

Health and Welfare authorized the availability of Essiac on a "compassionate use" basis. Their decision was based in part on the lack of reports of problems in 78 patients who used Essiac between 1978 and 1982.

## HOW DOES IT INTERACT WITH OTHER THERAPIES?

There are no known interactions between Essiac and medications or other herbs. However, most interactions between herbs and medications have not been studied. Tell your health care provider if you are using herbal supplements.

## HOW DO WE KNOW IT WORKS?

Essiac is supported by many personal testimonials from cancer patients, but there are no careful scientific studies. Resperin Corporation received approval in 1978 from the Canadian government to study Essiac in humans. This permission was withdrawn four years later when the studies were not proceeding as expected. The Canadian Government does not consider Essiac to be an effective cancer treatment.

There are no reports of research studies in people with HIV infection. On the other hand, laboratory studies of the herbs used in Essiac document some anti-tumor effects. Carefully designed research studies are needed.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Essiac is a tea originally made from four herbs. A Canadian nurse developed it in 1922 and used it to treat many cancer patients. Essiac is claimed to strengthen the immune system, relieve pain, and shrink cancerous tumors. Despite many personal reports of health benefits from Essiac, there are no scientific studies to support its use.

Essiac appears to be safe to use. It is available in several forms, based on different recipes, from competing providers. Prices vary widely. Be sure to obtain a complete list of ingredients.