Essiac Uses (incl. Thyroid, Lyme & CFS): Is There Any Evidence?

Many people turn to complementary therapies after being confronted with a chronic illness that's not well understood by conventional medicine. Some decide to try Essiac in addition to standard care. When is this a good idea? Can it be dangerous in some cases? Where can you even find trusted evidence to make an informed choice for yourself? This article aims to help you in your quest for answers by acknowledging unconventional diagnoses and Essiac uses while summing up the research behind them.

Disclaimer: This article is for informational purposes only. Essiac may interact with drugs, supplements, and foods. If you or a loved one is undergoing treatment for any of the conditions listed in this article, please discuss the use of any over-the-counter (OTC) medications and herbal supplements with your health care team. Do not take any supplements before consulting your health care team. The FDA has not approved Essiac for treating cancer or any other medical condition. Essiac is sold as a herbal dietary supplement.

What do People Use Essiac for?

Getting Started

To jump to the list of uncommon Essiac uses, click here.

Essiac is a botanical formulation of four herbs: burdock root, sheep sorrel leaves, slippery elm inner bark, and Indian or Turkey rhubarb root. It was popularized in the 1920s by Canadian nurse Rene Caisse (Cassileth, 2011).

Main Uses

People use Essiac either as a health tonic, cleanse, or add-on to treatment for various health conditions.

Proponents claim that Essiac may support the immune system, help the body detoxify, reduce inflammation, and boost antioxidant defense.

Essiac is also among the most common complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) supplements taken by cancer patients. Most patients who take Essiac have advanced disease and received or are still receiving chemotherapy. Yet, no placebo-controlled human studies are available to back up its use (Dy et al., 2004).

Overall, clinical trials on Essiac are sparse and few. There is still not enough quality evidence to recommend its use for any condition (Leonard et al., 2006; Kabeel et al., 2018).

A Gap in Conventional Medicine

While the use of Essiac among cancer patients remains controversial, anecdotal claims about other uncommon uses continue to come up.

People report using Essiac in addition to conventional therapy for conditions such as fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, lupus, low thyroid, chronic candida, chronic Lyme disease, chemical sensitivities, “brain fog,” and others.

Many of the diseases Essiac is sometimes used for are considered “fringe”—they are not accepted or well-understood by conventional medicine.

These conditions are likely to leave patients dissatisfied with conventional care, which is often the first step to considering complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). According to some estimates, 40% of adults in the U.S. use some form of CAM, including dietary supplements. Most have chronic, recurrent, or serious illnesses (Ventola, 2010).

Also, the use of dietary supplements was at an all-time high in 2020. According to analyses, this was mainly due to people looking to support their immune function amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Lordan, 2021).

The Problem Deepens

Each patient frustrated with conventional care or looking to improve their health holistically is a potential CAM user. This means that, unofficially, the list of uncommon Essiac uses grows every day.

Healthcare professionals often lack the knowledge and communication skills to properly counsel patients about CAM treatments like Essiac. As a consequence, patients are hesitant to even mention that they plan on using “alternative” therapies, deepening the gap (Ventola, 2010).

For example, studies indicate that up to 9% of cancer patients use Essiac, mostly alongside chemotherapy. Patients may be fearful to bring this up with their oncologists, while oncologists may not feel comfortable discussing complementary and alternative therapies (Dy et al., 2004).

One study revealed that two-thirds of chronically ill patients use dietary supplements, but only 30% will bring this up with their physicians. In another survey, 72% of patients did *not* report their use of alternative therapies to their health care providers (Boyer, 2015; Kroll, 2004).

Searching for Evidence

There is an absence of quality, evidence-based information for patients wanting to use supplements like Essiac. Lacking better sources, people are turning to Facebook groups,

online forums, unverified websites, and untested vendors trying to figure out whether taking Essiac for their specific condition makes any sense.

To bridge the gap, we've created this independent, up-to-date, science-based resource about uncommon, anecdotal Essiac uses.

Randomized, placebo-controlled trials are needed to assess the safety and efficacy of Essiac.

Since there aren't many human studies, this article takes on a biohacking approach: it relies on openly sharing the science behind pathways in the body that Essiac and its active compounds may act on (Yetisen, 2018).

List of Uncommon & Controversial Essiac Uses

Limitations and Caveats

The available research is extremely limited and should be interpreted with caution. There is not enough evidence to recommend Essiac for any of the uses listed below.

The mechanisms discussed in each section are mostly based on experimental animal and cellular data, and as such, are hypothetical and unproven.

Essiac should be used with caution and in addition to conventional treatment and other complementary alternative modalities for most of the conditions listed below.

Many of the listed conditions have diverse possible causes and accompanying symptoms. The best approach to managing them is usually individualized and relies on working with a qualified healthcare practitioner to find the underlying cause.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved Essiac or Flor-Essence to treat cancer or any other medical condition. Essiac is classified and sold as a dietary supplement or health tonic. The FDA regulates dietary supplements as foods, not drugs. Manufacturers are responsible for ensuring that the product is safe and that the label claims are truthful and not misleading.

1) Toxins & Heavy Metals Detox

The problem:

Environmental pollution has increased our toxic burden. More and more people are exposed to chemicals and heavy metals like arsenic, aluminum, cadmium, chromium, lead, and mercury. In some cases, chronic exposure to toxins and heavy metals may lead to cancer and other serious health problems. Some natural therapies are being researched for helping detoxify heavy metals from the body (Tchounwou et al., 2012).

Anecdotal claims:

Proponents claim that Essiac may help the body detox chemicals and heavy metals like aluminum, lead, and mercury.

Level of evidence:

Low.

Quality human studies are lacking. Only animal and cell-based studies on plants in Essiac have been published.

Potential mechanism:

Antioxidants (catechins and polyphenols) in Essiac may induce phase II detoxification enzymes. These enzymes are purported to help flush carcinogens from the body and support cancer prevention, but more data are needed (Pandey & Rizvi, 2009; Surh et al., 2008, Wilkinson & Clapper, 1997).

Burdock, sheep sorrel, and rhubarb also improved detoxification in animal studies.

Burdock reduced inflammation from cigarette smoke exposure and protected the liver against cadmium, acetaminophen, a toxic Chinese herb, a diet high in unhealthy fats, and other liver-damaging chemicals (Possebon et al., 2018; Lin et al., 1996; Predes et al., 2014; El-Kott et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2020; Romualdo et al., 2020).

Sheep sorrel extract protected the liver and other organs against toxic chemicals in rats. Quercetin, which is high in sheep sorrel herb, prevented aluminum from damaging and killing brain cells in rats (Alkushi, 2017; Sharma et al., 2016).

According to 12 small studies on nearly 900 people, rhubarb may aid detoxification and reduce the symptoms and toxic effects of pesticide and herbicide poisoning (Wang & Pan, 2015; Wang et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2012).

2) MTHFR Mutations

The problem:

MTHFR gene mutations (MTHFR C677T polymorphism) have been linked with heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, neurological diseases, diabetes, psoriasis, adverse pregnancy outcomes, cancer, and others (Liu & Gupta, 2015; Petrone et al., 2021).

The MTHFR enzyme affects a person's folate metabolism and pathways linked to antioxidant status and detoxification. About 35% of the North American population has an MTHFR mutation that reduces enzyme activity. Scientists are searching for nutrients and supplements that may help prevent health complications from MTHFR mutations (Liu & Gupta, 2015, Kim, 2009).

Anecdotal claims:

Proponents say that Essiac may support more optimal detox in people with MTHFR mutations. Some people claim that MTHFR mutations may increase a person's risk of heavy metal poisoning, multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS), and cancer.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

No studies on Essiac or its constituent plants in people with MTHFR mutations have been published. MTHFR mutations do seem to increase the risk of some cancers. The link between MTHFR and sensitivity to toxins and chemicals is unclear.

Potential mechanism:

Essiac may support detoxification. Hypothetically, detoxification may be helpful in some people with MTHFR mutations exposed to toxins and heavy metals.

The impact of MTHFR heavy metals accumulation in the body has only been tested in small studies. In one study, prenatal exposure to cadmium seemed to increase the risk of neural tube defects in fetuses with MTHFR and SOD2 mutations. In another study, MTHFR mutations were linked with hypersensitivity to mercury (Liu et al., 2021; Austin et al., 2014).

One study didn't find a link between MTHFR and multiple chemical sensitivity (McKeown-Eyssen et al., 2004).

Supporting detox may also possibly reduce the side effects of chemotherapy in people with MTHFR mutations. On the downside, activating some detoxifying enzymes may increase the resistance to certain chemotherapy drugs (Pandey & Rizvi, 2009; Surh et al., 2008, Wilkinson & Clapper, 1997; Wu et al., 2020; Dy et al., 2004).

MTHFR may also affect the response and side effects to chemotherapy drugs (like 5-fluorouracil, methotrexate, and anti-inflammatory chemotherapy), but the findings so far have been conflicting (Kim, 2009).

More clinical studies are needed.

3) Parasites

The problem:

Parasitic infections can go unnoticed for years and cause severe health problems. Some parasitic infections, like schistosomiasis, have been linked to cancer. The treatment options are limited (Mostafa et al., 1999; Hatta, 2021).

Anecdotal claims:

Purportedly, some Essiac users report success clearing parasites from the body, often in combination with other herbs and conventional treatment.

Level of evidence:

Low.

No human studies are available.

A couple of animal and cell-based studies investigated the anti-parasitic potential burdock root and sheep sorrel herb. All herbal remedies for parasitic infections are typically used alongside conventional treatment based on anecdotal data. There is not enough clinical evidence to determine their safety and efficacy.

Potential mechanism:

Arctiin from burdock root seems to kill schistosomes (*S. mansoni*) in test tubes. High-dose arctiin injections reduced the parasitic liver burden in rats (Saco et al., 2017).

Burdock was active against *S. mansoni* worms in cells, *Dactylogyrus intermedius* parasites in goldfish, and *Toxoplasma gondii* in cells and in mice (Dias et al., 2017; Tu et al., 2018; Tu et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

Sheep sorrel herb and quercetin, its main active compound, killed various parasites in test tubes and mice (Calzada et al., 1999; Panda & Lyten, 2018; Calzada et al., 1999; Panda & Lyten, 2018).

Read more about whether Essiac can help fight parasites in this article.

4) Chronic Candida

The problem:

Conventional medicine recognizes the diagnosis of candida infections. However, the concept of chronic and subclinical candida overgrowth—its symptoms and health implications—is controversial. There's also an urgent need for new alternatives since candida is becoming resistant to antifungal drugs (Santos et al., 2018).

Anecdotal claims:

Some users, such as women prone to candida infections due to frequent antibiotic use, claim that Essiac helped with their chronic candida problems. Most take Essiac in addition to anti-fungal herbs.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

Clinical studies are lacking. Burdock root was tested against candida in cells. No studies investigated the effects of Essiac on candida.

Potential mechanism:

Burdock root blocked the growth of candida in test tubes, but its effects on candida in humans aren't known (Gentil et al., 2006).

Candida attacks people with weakened immunity. Essiac supports the immune system and a healthy anti-inflammatory response. This may encourage the body to get rid of candida, when added to conventional drugs and anti-fungal herbs (Ruiz et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019; Seely et al., 2007).

Mucilage in Essiac may also act as a prebiotic fiber, which boosts gut microbiome health. This might be helpful since microbiome imbalances are known to make people more prone to stubborn, hard-to-treat candida infections (Leonard et al., 2006; Sam et al., 2017).

5) Toxic Mold Syndrome

The problem:

The diagnosis of "toxic mold syndrome" is not widely accepted. The syndrome is associated with exposure to mold-contaminated environments. Molds can cause allergic immune imbalances. They may trigger asthma, hay fever, lung inflammation, and even life-threatening infections in people with weakened immunity (Edmondson et al., 2005).

Anecdotal claims:

People report using Essiac as a general health tonic while detoxing from mold exposure.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

No studies on Essiac and mold syndrome have been carried out. Essiac may have indirect effects.

Potential mechanism:

Essiac may support general health in people healing from mold exposure. It may also help by balancing the immune system, which may be important in overcoming allergic inflammation triggered by mold exposure. Also, Essiac activates detox pathways that might theoretically help the body cleanse mold-related toxins (Seely et al., 2007; Pandey & Rizvi, 2009; Surh et al., 2008, Wilkinson & Clapper, 1997).

6) Lymphatic Drainage

The problem:

Lymphatic drainage involves gentle massage, herbal supplements, exercise, or any other holistic treatment that encourages the movement of lymph fluids. Lymph fluids help remove waste and toxins from the body.

Lymphatic drainage is usually done to relieve painful swelling of lymph nodes in the hands, feet, or neck called lymphedema. Lymphedema is a common side effect of cancer interventions including surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy (Thompson et al., 2021).

Other conditions like chronic inflammation, digestive issues, fatigue, and others have been suggested to be connected with poor lymphatic circulation in traditional systems of medicine. This hasn't been proven, but the research is promising (Sheikhi-Mobarakeh et al., 2020).

Anecdotal claims:

Some users claim that Essiac helps stimulate lymph flow and promote lymph health.

Level of evidence:

Low.

No studies have tested Essiac on lymphedema.

Potential mechanism:

Essiac may help support lymphatic health by reducing swelling and inflammation and promoting wound healing. Burdock root, as the main ingredient in Essiac, reduced markers of inflammation and oxidative stress in small clinical trials of osteoarthritis patients. Complex sugars from burdock root also improved blood flow in rats (Maghsoumi-Norouzabad et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2020).

7) Autoimmune Disease (incl. Lupus)

The problem:

Treatment options for autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis (MS), and lupus have limitations. Available treatments can't always keep a person's symptoms under control. Patients often experience flare-ups and seek alternatives to reduce symptoms and manage their health (Taibi & Bourguignon, 2003).

Surveys reveal that over 50% of patients with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) and 70% of people with MS have used complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). However, few randomized controlled trials of these therapies have been carried out (Greco et al., 2013; Yadav et al., 2010).

Anecdotal claims:

Experiences are mixed. Some people claim that Essiac worsened the symptoms of their autoimmune disease, while others say it helped.

Level of evidence:

Very low. Caution.

Limited data suggest that burdock root may have anti-inflammatory potential. However, Essiac may worsen autoimmune disease by overstimulating the immune system. Essiac has not been clinically researched in patients with autoimmune disease.

Potential mechanism:

Most supplements used to improve symptoms of autoimmune disease are thought to help by improving blood vessel health and reducing inflammation and oxidative stress. Essiac may also act on these pathways, according to limited data in cells and animals (Greco et al., 2013; Ruiz et al., 2021; Leonard et al., 2006; Cheung et al., 2005; Seely et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2020).

Burdock, the main ingredient in Essiac, reduced markers of inflammation and oxidative stress in small clinical trials on people with osteoarthritis and colon inflammation. Cell-based experiments suggest it may reduce the activity of immune cells (Th1 and Th17) associated with autoimmunity and inflammation (Maghsoumi-Norouzabad et al., 2014; Mizuki et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015).

Essiac is thought to help balance the immune system. However, the combination of constituent plants it contains may also cause immune stimulation. This can worsen autoimmune diseases by activating immune cells that are already in overdrive (Th1) (Seely et al., 2007; Dardalhon et al., 2008).

Research confirms that immunostimulatory herbal supplements may worsen preexisting autoimmune diseases or trigger autoimmune disease in genetically predisposed persons (Lee & Werth, 2004).

Therefore, caution is advised in people with autoimmune disease to prevent adverse reactions. Clinical research needs to assess the safety of Essiac in people with autoimmune disease.

8) Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) & Fibromyalgia (FMS)

The problem:

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS), is marked by severe fatigue. Fibromyalgia (FMS) is marked by widespread pain, fatigue, and issues with sleep, memory, and mood (CDC).

ME/CFS and fibromyalgia are similar but distinct medical problems. Both are hard to diagnose and the treatment options for both diseases are limited (CDC).

Recent research reveals that the possible culprit behind both of these complex diseases may be nerve, brain, and chronic systemic inflammation (Bäckryd et al., 2017; Nakatomi et al., 2014; Jonsjö et al., 2020).

Anecdotal claims:

Advocates claim that Essiac may support the healing of the myelin sheath around nerves. It's also purported to improve energy levels.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

No studies have tested Essiac on ME/CFS, fibromyalgia, or myelin levels.

Potential mechanism:

In theory, Essiac may help by reducing inflammation that may underlie both chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. It might also stimulate pathways associated with improved energy levels and endurance, according to preliminary research (Maghsoumi-Norouzabad et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2014).

Read more about this mechanism in our article about the effects of Essiac on longevity and mitochondrial health.

9) Thyroid Imbalances

The problem:

People with thyroid imbalances commonly use complementary and alternative therapies, including herbal supplements and dietary changes. Clinical data to support their efficacy are lacking, though (Benvenga et al., 2019).

Anecdotal claims:

Anecdotally, some people claim that Essiac may help support thyroid function. Reported uses include underactive thyroid, overactive thyroid, and Hashimoto's. Several people with thyroid issues mention being worried about interactions with thyroid medications.

Level of evidence:

Very low. Caution.

Essiac and its constituent plants have not been researched in patients with any type of thyroid dysfunction. The impact of Essiac on thyroid health is unknown.

No data on interactions with thyroid medications are available. Caution is advised.

Potential mechanism:

Essiac may hypothetically support thyroid health by balancing the immune system. Inflammation is an underlying factor for many thyroid issues. However, caution is advised with autoimmune thyroid conditions like Hashimoto's (please see "Autoimmune Disease" above) (Seely et al., 2007; Dardalhon et al., 2008).

Additionally, people with low thyroid may use Essiac wanting to improve energy levels. According to some scientists, Essiac may contribute to healthy energy levels by supporting the mitochondria (Wu et al., 2014; Oliveira et al., 2015).

Encouraging detoxification may also be associated with an improvement in some thyroid issues, but this hasn't been confirmed in clinical trials (Pandey & Rizvi, 2009; Surh et al., 2008, Wilkinson & Clapper, 1997).

Far more data are needed.

The potential causes of and experimental treatments being researched for various thyroid issues are beyond the scope of this article.

10) Chronic Epstein Barr Virus (EBV) and chronic viral infections

The problem:

Epstein-Barr Virus (EBV) is a type of herpes virus. About 95% of the healthy population is infected. Some scientists have suggested a link between EBV and cancer, autoimmune diseases, and other chronic health problems (Kuri et al., 2020).

For some people, dormant EBV infection may reactivate and cause chronic symptoms. The diagnosis of chronic EBV infection and its link to various health problems remains controversial (Fujiwara et al., 2020).

Anecdotal claims:

Some users claim Essiac helped with EBV while others say that it had no effect. Several users mentioned a link between their chronic EBV infection and thyroid imbalances. Essiac was usually used in addition to conventional treatment and other remedies in all people suffering from chronic EBV and other chronic viral infections.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

Essiac and its constituent plants have not been researched in people with EBV. The impact of Essiac on chronic viral infections is unknown.

Potential mechanism:

Essiac may support the immune system and aid healthy detoxification. Since EBV and other chronic flare-ups can be caused by declining immune function, natural remedies that support a normal immune response may have a place in holistic management. More research is needed (Yang & Gao, 2020).

11) COVID-19

The problem:

There's a need to find evidence-based ways to support the immune system and nutrient status among the population. COVID-19 has triggered an increase in dietary supplement use, but few human studies on the safety and efficacy of dietary supplements amid the pandemic have been carried out (Lordan, 2021).

Anecdotal claims:

Some people have reported using Essiac to support the immune system amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Level of evidence:

Very low. Caution.

No research supports the use of any supplement to treat or prevent COVID-19.

Potential mechanism:

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people with weakened immune systems are more likely to get COVID-19 and suffer severe symptoms.

As mentioned under the previous use, Essiac may support a healthy immune response. However, randomized clinical trials are needed to assess its effectiveness (Seely et al., 2007).

12) Chronic Lyme Disease

The problem:

Medicine struggles to define Chronic Lyme disease (CLD). This disease has been associated with many symptoms and syndromes due to long-term *Borrelia burgdorferi* infection. There is no well-researched treatment, and scientists argue that long courses of antibiotics are not the answer (Shor et al., 2019; Lantos, 2016; Auwaerter, 2007).

Anecdotal claims:

Faced with a diagnosis that's often dismissed and few treatment options, people with chronic Lyme have reported using Essiac to support general health and detox in addition to their other therapies.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

Essiac and its constituent plants have not been researched in people with Chronic Lyme disease.

Potential mechanism:

Hypothetically, Essiac may support detox, immune and lymphatic system health, and normal energy levels (Seely et al., 2007).

13) Colon Issues & Diverticulitis

The problem:

Diverticulitis is when small pouches (called diverticula) form in the intestines and cause infection or inflammation.

Colorectal (bowel) polyps are small growths on the inner lining of the large intestine (colon) or rectum. Some types of polyps can change into cancer over time, but not all polyps become cancer (Delavari et al., 2014).

Diverticulitis and polyps are two different conditions. However, some people suffer from both. Patients with diverticulosis may have a higher risk of colorectal polyps (Muhammad et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2019).

Anecdotal claims:

Proponents list diverticulitis and colon polyps among less common Essiac uses. Most view Essiac as a preventive measure.

Level of evidence:

Low.

Essiac has researched in people with diverticulitis or colon polyps.

One clinical trial tested burdock, the main constituent herb in Essiac, in people with diverticulitis.

Potential mechanism:

Drinking burdock tea three times per day for about 26 months reduced symptom recurrence in patients with colonic diverticulitis in one clinical trial of 161 people. Only 10.6% of those who drank burdock tea experienced recurrence, compared with 31.8% of those not taking the tea. The symptom-free duration increased by 14 months in the burdock tea arm (Mizuki et al., 2019)

Scientists are also investigating whether Essiac may play a role in cancer prevention, which may be important for people with colorectal polyps. Read the research behind Essiac and cancer prevention in this post.

14) Diabetes, Metabolic & Hormonal Imbalances

The problem:

Many people with metabolic and hormonal imbalances try complementary and alternative therapies. More research on their safety and effectiveness is needed.

Anecdotal claims:

People have reported the use of Essiac for a wide range of metabolic and hormonal imbalances. The list includes diseases like diabetes, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome

(PCOS), sex hormone imbalances, high estrogen levels, exposure to environmental estrogens, and others.

Level of evidence:

Very low.

Essiac and its constituent herbs have not been properly researched in humans for any of the listed conditions.

Potential mechanism:

Preliminary research in animals and cells hints that Essiac may support metabolic health by activating pathways in the mitochondria and helping to detox the liver. Its effects on other detoxification pathways in the body may also play a role (Huang et al., 2012).

The potential causes of and experimental treatments being researched for various metabolic and hormonal issues are beyond the scope of this article.

To learn about the role of phytoestrogens in Essiac and Flor Essence (and whether they're good or bad), head over to this post.

Essiac Resources

If you're just learning about Essiac, the following articles can help you get started or dive deeper:

- **Unbiased Essiac review**, which covers the main benefits of Essiac and its individual herbs based on the existing scientific evidence
- **Sheep sorrel leaves vs. roots**, which goes into differences in active compounds and potential benefits (showing that all published Essiac studies used the leaves)
- **Essiac and cancer**, which covers the scientific research and historical data on this controversial topic
- **Essiac and cancer treatment** (chemotherapy), providing an up-to-date, evidence-based overview of the possible interactions
- **Essiac and prevention**, which looks into the science of cancer prevention in relation to herbs in Essiac