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Milk thistle in liver diseases: past, present, future.

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Abstract

Silybum marianum or milk thistle (MT) is the most well-researched plant in the treatment of liver disease. The active complex of MT is a lipophilic extract from the seeds of the plant and is composed of three isomer flavonolignans (silybin, silydianin, and silychristin) collectively known as silymarin. Silybin is a component with the greatest degree of biological activity and makes up 50% to 70% of silymarin. Silymarin is found in the entire plant but it is concentrated in the fruit and seeds. Silymarin acts as an antioxidant by reducing free radical production and lipid peroxidation, has antifibrotic activity and may act as a toxin blockade agent by inhibiting binding of toxins to the hepatocyte cell membrane receptors. In animals, silymarin reduces liver injury caused by acetaminophen, carbon tetrachloride, radiation, iron overload, phenylhydrazine, alcohol, cold ischaemia and *Amanita phalloides*. Silymarin has been used to treat alcoholic liver disease, acute and chronic viral hepatitis and toxin-induced liver diseases.

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