

# Senna Tea

## Information Every Dietitian Should Know



The leaves, pods and fruit of *Cassia senna*, more commonly known as the senna plant, have been used as a laxative dating back to the ninth Century<sup>1,2</sup>. Modern medicine takes advantage of the natural laxative properties of senna by using it in medication that is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as an over-the-counter laxative<sup>3</sup>. Most clinicians are familiar with senna in this capacity. However, the leaves of the senna plant are also sold in most large grocery stores as tea. This handout contains important information regarding the safety and effectiveness of senna tea.

### Safety and Dosing Information

There is little information about the use of senna tea in contrast to medications that contain senna. As such, no dosing information has been established, though 1-2 grams of dried senna leaves steeped in hot water for 10 minutes, up to twice per day, has been recommended for tea preparation<sup>2</sup>. As with most laxatives, chronic use of senna may lead to dependence, abuse, abdominal discomfort, or diarrhea. Individuals with a history of bowel obstructions, inflammatory bowel diseases should use senna with caution. Senna is not appropriate for individuals who are taking laxatives or who have diarrhea. Some evidence suggests that senna may interfere with cytochrome p450 enzymes in some individuals; therefore senna should be used with caution in anyone taking medications that are metabolized by cytochrome p450 enzymes. Hypokalemia has been cited as a potential side effect<sup>2</sup>.

### Effectiveness

Medications using senna as a main ingredient have been researched for their effectiveness in alleviating constipation, but there is no research on the effect of senna tea on constipation. The FDA has approved medicinal forms of senna for relief of constipation, however several studies have found the effectiveness to be inconclusive.

### The Bottom Line?

There is limited data to support the use of senna tea as an effective way to alleviate constipation. However, senna tea is likely safe for most people. If your patient or client is interested in trying senna tea, it is important to conduct a thorough assessment including medical history and current medications. Patients who chose to use senna should be instructed to drink plenty of water, stop using senna tea if they develop diarrhea, and to use senna for no longer than 10 days, and to contact their doctor if they experience symptoms of hypokalemia.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Natural Standard: The Authority on Integrative Medicine. *Senna (Cassia senna)*. Available from <http://www.naturalstandard.com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/tools/handouts/hsf/patient-senna.asp>. Accessed 20 August 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Fragakis AB, Thomson C. Popular Dietary Supplements, 3rd Edition. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2007.

<sup>3</sup>MedLine Plus: Trusted Health Information for You. *Senna*. Available from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/652.html>. Accessed 20 August 2012.