

# PROOF!

What works  
in alternative  
medicine

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Road  
test ✓

## The best Aloe vera juice

### ALOE VERA GEL

Manufacturer:

Forever Living Products

Price: £18 for 1000 ml

Rating: ★★★★★

This Forever Living product was the first to ever win an IASC seal, and is the first to be used in a double-blind placebo-controlled trial as a treatment for IBS. It is arguably the best-selling aloe product in the world, a position built up over 24 years.

Its polysaccharide content falls within the IASC range, but varies from 1500 to 3000 mg/L, depending on when the plant was harvested. Aloe gel makes up 97-98 per cent of the content; the rest includes 62 ppm of aloin, and the

preservatives potassium sorbate and sodium benzoate.

Unlike many of its competitors that use the whole aloe leaf, Forever Living uses just the inner leaf. The company says there is no evidence to suggest that the whole leaf is any more potent—a moot point within the industry.

Forever Living offers a full, 90-day, money-back guarantee, which is one reason, it says, that the product is not available in shops. Instead, it is sold either by mail order or through its large network-marketing distribution chain (call **0870 755 5805** for more information).



Key to ratings: ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Very Good ★★★★★ Good ★★★★★ Fair ★★★★★ Poor

CODE : 1409

Independent 'best-buy' recommendations

## Choosing the best from the cons, rip-offs and might-have-beens

If Aloe vera were a pop group, it would undoubtedly be The Beatles. It is probably the single most popular—and possibly the best known—alternative remedy around. Mirroring this is the fact that there are over 189,000 sites on the Web dedicated to this supposedly 'wonder plant', and at least a hundred aloe products available in shops in the UK alone.

Many people testify to its curative, almost miraculous, qualities, although some go too far, as did a Baltimore businessman jailed for four years last December for selling Aloe vera as an intravenous cure for cancer.

Aloe vera—a succulent plant belonging to the lily family chiefly from southern Africa—has been hailed as a miraculous healing agent for thousands of years. Legend has it that Aristotle urged his pupil Alexander the Great to invade the island of Socotra to collect its aloe plants so that the wounds of his soldiers could be treated. Cleopatra and Nefertiti are said to have included aloe in their skincare regimes. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain, aloe was by far the most popular remedy for a wide range of ailments.

Nevertheless, despite its widespread use for thousands of years, the chemistry of Aloe vera is still not truly understood. We know that it contains over 10,000 proteins and that hundreds of other substances have been identified, many of them useful in the healing of body tissue.

Given all of its apparently noteworthy properties, possibly the most remarkable thing of all is that Aloe vera is 99 per cent water. It grows in tropical areas, and its leaves have to retain water for long periods of time. This means that its active ingredients are present in very minute proportions, thus suggesting that they work synergistically.

The main ingredients found in the remaining one per cent of

## How to avoid the aloe con

*Aloe vera* has enjoyed a 'good press' for the past 4000 years. Sadly, of late, it's a bandwagon upon which some unscrupulous manufacturers have jumped to fleece the unsuspecting consumer.

Products have been watered down and others adulterated with cheap substitutes, while others still have been found to contain no aloe whatsoever!

The problems are magnified by the multiplicity of outlets. Apart from the usual shops and healthfood stores, there are network-marketing organisations, mail-order schemes and around 189,000 websites dedicated to selling *Aloe vera*.

Trading standards legislation seems to offer little in the way of protection, although there are plans to tighten up on the claims made on the labels, especially on bottles of aloe juice. So how can you avoid the great aloe vera con?

The best place to start is to see if the product has been awarded an International Aloe Science Council (IASC) seal. This seal guarantees the purity of the aloe contained in the bottle or the jar, but not the amount of aloe. So, a 90-per-cent purity doesn't mean that the contents are 90-per-cent aloe—and some manufacturers appear to be deliberately obscure. Also, be sure it really is the IASC seal; some manufacturers have altered the seal slightly and put this on their labels instead.

Furthermore, the seal is not an absolute guarantee of quality. Some manufacturers have successfully conned the IASC by producing a chemical cocktail that mimics aloe.

While on the subject of 100-per-cent markings, be wary of any product that claims that the bottle contents are 100-per-cent aloe—that's an impossibility. Aloe is a plant that needs preservatives. Without them, the product will go off within a week, and it will hardly have reached the store by then. The best you can hope for is around 98-per-cent aloe.

It's probably better if the product has been cold-processed—which means that more of the natural ingredients should be preserved.

You also want a product that is 'aloin-free' although, in reality, the aloin should be no more than 50 ppm (parts per million). Aloin is a very strong laxative and is an unfortunate byproduct of the plant, so unless you are extremely constipated, you won't want it in your aloe juice. (If you are severely constipated, there are aloe products on the market with the aloin included. It works a treat.)

You'll see a lot about polysaccharides on the label. Polysaccharides are the natural sugars of the aloe plant, and all kinds of claims have been made for their healing properties. Around 1500–3000 mg/L are found naturally in the plant—any more and the delicate synergistic balance could be disturbed, although this is an unproven theory.

Be suspicious of any product that's been reconstituted or reformulated in some way—it means that the natural aloe has been tampered with.

Finally, expect to pay around £16 for a litre of aloe. Much less and you may be making a false economy.

solid matter—as found in *Aloe barbadensis* miller and *Aloe arborescens*, the two most popular species used for medicinal purposes—range from minerals, vitamins, amino acids, proteins and essential fatty acids (EFAs) to anti-inflammatory agents, antiseptics, analgesics and antiparasitics.

Aloe vera also contains polysaccharides, long-chain sugar molecules believed to have a wide range of medicinal benefits. At low levels of between 50 and 600 molecules, polysaccharides are supposed to reduce inflammation, and so could prove helpful in disorders such as ulcerative colitis, arthritis and gastric reflux. At moderate levels of up

to 1500 molecules, they are supposedly able to work as intracellular antioxidants, and so may be useful for people with heart disease or Parkinson's. At very high levels—up to 9000 molecules—the theory goes that polysaccharides can have a healing effect on immune disorders such as cancer and AIDS.

One manufacturer, Carrington Laboratories in Texas, is so convinced of aloe's efficacy as an immune builder that it has spent millions of dollars developing a product called Acemannan, a generic version of the aloe polysaccharide.

It should be stressed that none of these benefits has been proved absolutely in any scientific

medical trials.

The aloe plant yields both aloe gel and aloe juice. These products are different from each other and have different uses, even though the terms are often misused or interchanged in advertisements for aloe products.

The clear gel, or mucilage, comes from the inner part of the aloe leaf. Aloe gel is famous for its wound-healing properties and as a remedy for minor burns, abrasions and other skin irritations, such as eczema. Its ability to heal skin lesions has been observed in many studies, and it's probably safe to say that, despite a few studies to the contrary, its healing powers on the skin are indisputable.

One study showed that burns wounds treated with aloe healed significantly faster than those treated with Vaseline (*J Med Assoc Thailand*, 1995; 78: 403-9). Another study showed that 0.5 per cent aloe extract cured 83 per cent of a group of psoriasis patients in 16 weeks compared with 6.6 per cent with a placebo gel (*Trop Med Intern Hlth*, 1996; 1: 505-9).

What is disputable, and certainly controversial, is the use of aloe internally. Aloe juice, or latex, comes from just beneath the 'skin' of the leaves. It contains the powerful laxative aloin, an anthraquinone glucoside also found in senna, rhubarb and cascara sagrada. Aloin is present in the sap and rind of the aloe plant, and so it is vital that the manufacturer strips the plant carefully, or you might get more than you bargained for.

So why drink aloe juice? Its advocates claim that it can help improve the cardiovascular system and lower cholesterol, that it can improve gastrointestinal problems such as ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and that it can ease bone and joint problems such as arthritis. Aloe's fans point to a range of studies suggesting that aloe juice can help all or some of these problems, but any objective observers would have to declare that the jury is still out.

To be fair, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies are extremely expensive to mount, and few organisations in the complementary camp have the type of budgets that pharmaceutical companies have to launch such research.

However, having said that, one major aloe manufacturer, Forever Living Products, is starting a double-blind placebo-controlled trial of aloe in the treatment of IBS with the Morriston Hospital in Swansea. The Prince Charles Foundation for Integrated Medicine is part-funding the study, which involves 200 patients, to the tune of £86,000.

Many of the benefits of aloe tend to be anecdotal so, if you know people who've improved by drinking aloe juice, you might still want to try it for yourself. In this case, you are then faced with another problem—finding the product that is going to deliver what it says on the label.

Aloe juice seems to be open to more abuse from manufacturers than most other natural remedies, possibly because of its popularity and because it's so easy to cheat. However, trading standards authorities are now taking a keen interest, and we hear that legislation is on the way to provide better safeguards for the consumer.

An early trick was watering down the ingredients. One test in the mid-1980s found that, of the 200 aloe juices tested, only three contained enough aloe to be of any medicinal value. It's been reckoned that, as recently as 1993, fewer than one per cent of brands contained acceptable levels of aloe (*Ritter L, Aloe Vera: A Mission Discovered*, ISBN 0 9638 6090 9). One brand from the US, which claims to be a distillate of aloe, contains no aloe whatsoever. As most aloe products on the market come from the States or Mexico, UK consumers can take little comfort in being on this side of the Atlantic.

However, water dilution is easily detected and many of the manufacturers who suddenly emerged just to cheat the con-

sumer have almost as quickly disappeared. Cleverer methods of distillation have included the use of maltodextrin, a cheap carbohydrate obtained from corn starch, and others have used cose and glycerine.

Aware of these abuses, the International Aloe Science Council (IASC) set itself up to test the purity of the aloe contained in products. This can range from close to 100 per cent down to just 15 per cent of contents, depending upon the mix. Many manufacturers add fruit juices to the aloe to make it more palatable (aloe being one of Nature's more revolting tastes).

Unfortunately, this could be confusing for the consumer who doesn't have at least a basic grounding in Logic. While a bottle may contain 100 per cent pure aloe (as the label often says it does), the actual amount of aloe could be as low as five per cent – even though it may be 100 per cent pure!

The IASC test has also been open to abuse, and some manufacturers have won themselves an IASC seal by producing a cocktail of chemicals that was able to pass muster as real aloe. (Our lawyers would no doubt like us to add that we're not aware of any current holders of an IASC seal who have doctored their products!)

Aloe juice comes in one of three ways: as a pure, undiluted drink or supplement; as part of a mixture that may also include a fruit juice or herbs and other supplements; and as a capsule containing the gel.

In assessing these products for our road test, we've looked for a number of features that should add up to a package that delivers a reasonable level of aloe. This includes cold-processing (or heat-processed at a low temperature), a polysaccharide content of 1500–3000 mg/L, aloin of at most 50 ppm, a minimum use of preservatives and an IASC certificate. (For a more complete overview of what to look for in these products, see box on p.2.)

# About PROOF!

**PROOF!** is a monthly 12-page report on the best – and the worst – on offer in alternative and complementary medicine. Each month our laboratories test a wide variety of alternative and complementary medicines and supplements to find out their potency, their ingredients and other vital factors that determine whether you are buying the best money can buy – or a sugar pill.

**PROOF!** also tests the claims made by a wide range of other health and 'green' products and services – recent issues have reported on household cleaners, mobile phone shields for reducing radiation, and allergy tests. We also assess the latest 'magic bullets'. They're the products that suddenly appear on the Web, or in the Sunday newspaper supplements. But is there any scientific evidence for them? We tell you.

And what about the variety of alternative therapies, such as homeopathy, acupuncture, herbalism, shiatsu and the like? Is there any evidence to suggest that homeopathy will treat your asthma better than acupuncture, for instance? What's the best alternative treatment for ME or arthritis? Which treatments are safe, which may harm you? We tell you.

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