



Nopal Cactus: Benefits and Uses



Medically reviewed by Debra Rose Wilson, Ph.D., MSN, R.N., IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT — Written by Ana Gotter — Updated on May 26, 2017

[Antiviral](#) [Protects nerve cells](#) [Contains antioxidants](#)

[Regulates blood sugar levels](#) [Treats enlarged prostate](#)

[Reduces cholesterol](#) [Eliminates hangovers](#)

[Forms and doses](#) [Potential risks](#) [Recipes](#)

What is a nopal cactus?

Nopal cactus, also known as the prickly pear cactus, is found natively in the southwestern regions of the United States and in Mexico. The flat cactus pads can be eaten when the plant is young. When the cactus is older, it's too tough to eat. Nopal cactus is a common ingredient in foods in some regions of Mexico.

There are several ways to use nopal cactus, including in jellies and candies and as an aid to help harden plaster. There are also a number of medicinal uses, thanks to this cactus's varied health benefits.

1. It's an antiviral

Prevention is the best line of defense for contracting a virus. Nopal cactus has antiviral properties, and [some preliminary research](#) has found that it has antiviral activity against herpes simplex virus (HSV), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and HIV.

2. It protects nerve cells

Nerve cells can be damaged like all other cells. This can lead to sensory loss or pain. Nopal cactus can protect against this damage. For instance, [a 2014 study](#) [✓] found that it contains neuroprotective properties. This can help prevent nerve cells from damage or loss of function.

3. It's high in antioxidants

Antioxidants can protect our cells from damage caused by free radicals. Nopal cactus is full of antioxidants, and [a 2013 study](#) [✓] found that the cactus is able to reduce oxidative stress. Antioxidants can benefit everyone, regardless of age and preexisting conditions.

4. It can regulate blood sugar levels

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Nopal cactus may provide a complementary solution. Some research indicates that nopal cactus can decrease and regular blood sugar. [A 2012 study](#) [✓], for example, recommends taking nopal cactus together with other diabetes medications to help regulate blood sugar.

5. It can treat enlarged prostate

An enlarged prostate can be an uncomfortable problem for men, resulting in a need to urinate more frequently. [Early research has shown](#) that nopal cactus may help to treat enlarged prostates and may even be effective in

helping treat prostate cancer. Bonus: It may be able to do so with fewer side effects than traditional prescription medications.

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6. It may reduce cholesterol

[An early study found evidence](#)  that nopal cactus was able to decrease cholesterol. While overall levels of cholesterol dropped, LDL cholesterol (or “bad” cholesterol) dropped significantly. Nopal cactus may be able to lower cholesterol with much fewer side effects than traditional cholesterol medications.

7. It can eliminate hangovers

Nopal cactus may actually help with the symptoms of hangovers. There’s a catch — it’s most effective when you take the cactus’s extract before you start drinking, preventing the problem instead of treating it later. [A 2004 study](#) found strong evidence that nopal cactus extract significantly reduces the severity of hangovers when taken before drinking.

Forms and doses

Nopal cactus’s health benefits can be obtained in several different ways. The most obvious way — which also offers the best health benefits — is by eating the cactus directly. You can also take supplements in capsule, powder, extract, and even liquid form.

More research is needed to determine safe and efficient doses of each form of cactus. Most supplements typically recommend taking at least one dose of 500-650 milligrams on a daily basis.

Potential risks

Nopal cactus is considered most safe when eaten as a food instead of a supplement; this has the fewest side effects. While supplements are considered to be possibly safe, more evidence is needed. It's important to know that supplements are not monitored for safety, purity, quality, or packaging by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Choose your product carefully and from a reputable source.

Potential side effects of nopal cactus supplements include:

- headache
- nausea
- bloating
- diarrhea, or an increase of stool

Women who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant should not take nopal cactus supplements, because there isn't reliable information about whether or not it is safe.

If you have diabetes, you should be particularly careful when consuming nopal cactus or its supplements, as it can affect your blood sugar. Talk to your doctor before taking it, and make sure that you check your blood sugar frequently when testing it.

Recipes

Ready to incorporate more nopal cactus into your diet? Now you can with these quick and easy recipes:

- [nopales salad](#)
- [shrimp and nopal cactus salad](#)

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○ Current Version

○ May 26, 2017

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○ May 25, 2017

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