

# evening primrose oil

*Oenothera biennis*

Native Americans and the early settlers valued the evening primrose plant for its healing powers. Today, research focuses on the therapeutic effect of the oil from its seeds, which contain a special fat called gamma-linolenic acid (GLA).

## COMMON USES

- Eases rheumatoid arthritis pain.
- Can minimize symptoms of diabetic nerve damage.
- Relieves eczema symptoms.
- Helps treat premenstrual syndrome, endometriosis, and menstrual cramps.
- Lessens inflammation of acne, rosacea, and muscle strains.

## FORMS

- Capsule
- Softgel
- Oil

### CAUTION!

- Reminder: If you have a medical condition, talk to your doctor before taking supplements.

## What it is

Called evening primrose because its light yellow flowers open at dusk, this wildflower grows in North America and Europe. The plant and its root have long been used for medicinal purposes—to treat bruises, hemorrhoids, sore throat, and stomachaches. But the use of its seed oil, which contains gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), is relatively recent. GLA is an essential fatty acid that the body converts to hormonelike compounds called prostaglandins, which regulate a number of bodily functions.

Although the body can make GLA from other types of fat you consume, there is no one food that has appreciable amounts of GLA. Evening primrose oil provides a concentrated source: 7% to 10% of its fatty acids are in the form of GLA. There are, however, other sources of GLA. Borage seed oil and black currant seed oil contain higher amounts of GLA—20% to 26% for borage; 14% to 19% for black currant—than evening primrose oil, but they also have a higher percentage of other fatty acids that may interfere with GLA absorption. Most of the studies investigating the effects of GLA have used evening primrose oil, and for this reason it is the preferred source of GLA. Still, borage oil may be a good substitute: It is less expensive than evening primrose oil, and a lower dose is required to produce a therapeutic effect.

## What it does

The body produces several types of prostaglandins: Some promote inflammation, others control it. The GLA in evening primrose oil is directly converted to important anti-inflammatory prostaglandins, which accounts for most of the supplement's therapeutic effects. In addition, GLA is an important component of cell membranes.

*Although evening primrose oil comes in liquid form, softgels may be a more convenient way to take it.*



**PREVENTION:** In people with diabetes, the GLA in evening primrose oil has been shown to help prevent nerve damage (neuropathy), a common complication of the disease. In a study of people with mild diabetic neuropathy, one year of treatment with evening primrose oil reduced numbness and tingling, loss of sensation, and other symptoms of the disorder better than a placebo did, suggesting that evening primrose may be of value in reversing neuropathy.

**ADDITIONAL BENEFITS:** One of the leading uses for evening primrose oil is to treat eczema, an allergic skin condition that may develop if the body has trouble converting fats from food into GLA. Studies of people with eczema indicate that taking evening primrose oil for three to four months can help alleviate itching and reduce the need for topical steroid creams and drugs with unpleasant side effects.

Because of its GLA content, evening primrose oil can be effective for menstrual disorders, such as PMS, menstrual cramps, and endometriosis. In particular, the oil blocks the inflammatory prostaglandins that cause menstrual cramps. It also appears to ease the breast tenderness that some women experience just before their periods and may play a role in reversing infertility in some women.

Rheumatoid arthritis is characterized by joint pain and swelling, and studies have found that these symptoms improve with the supplementation of evening primrose oil or another source of GLA. Conditions that involve inflammation, such as rosacea, acne, and muscle strain, can also benefit from evening primrose oil.

## How to take it

**DOSAGE:** The recommended therapeutic dose for evening primrose oil is generally 1,000 mg three times a day. This supplies 240 mg of GLA a day. To get an equivalent amount of GLA from other sources, you would need to take 1,000 mg of borage oil or 1,500 mg of black currant oil each day. Evening primrose oil or borage oil can also be applied topically to the fingers to ease the symptoms of Raynaud's disease.

**GUIDELINES FOR USE:** Take evening primrose oil or other sources of GLA with meals to enhance absorption.

## Possible side effects

In studies, about 2% of the participants using evening primrose oil experienced bloating or abdominal upset. However, consuming it with food may lessen this effect.

## SHOPPING HINTS

- Many experts recommend buying evening primrose oil that contains a small amount of vitamin E. The fatty acids in evening primrose oil break down quickly; vitamin E slows this process.

## LATEST FINDINGS

- In a study of 60 people with eczema, GLA—the essential fatty acid in evening primrose oil that accounts for its therapeutic benefits—was found to be superior to a placebo in reducing the itching and oozing of the condition. Those in the GLA group took 274 mg twice a day (an amount found in approximately seven 1,000 mg evening primrose capsules) for 12 weeks. Examinations by a dermatologist every four weeks confirmed the gradual improvement of symptoms reported by these patients.
- A study from the University of Massachusetts Medical Center showed that very high doses of GLA in the form of borage oil (2.4 grams of GLA a day) reduced damage to joint tissue in people with rheumatoid arthritis. As a result, they had less joint pain and swelling.