Oregon Grape (*Berberis aquifolium*)

**Parts used and where grown:** Oregon grape is a close relative of barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*), and as with its cousin, the plant’s medicinal portion is the root. Although Oregon grape originated in North America, it now also grows in Europe.

**Historical or traditional use** (may or may not be supported by scientific studies): Before European colonists arrived, the indigenous peoples of North America treated all manner of complaints with Oregon grape.1 The berries were used for poor appetite. A tea made from the root was used to treat jaundice, arthritis, diarrhea, fever, and many other health problems.

**Active constituents:** Alkaloids, including berbamine, canadine, hydrastine, and the most famous, berberine, account for the beneficial activity of Oregon grape. Berberine has been shown to effectively treat diarrhea in patients infected with *E. coli*.2 One of the ways berberine may ease diarrhea is by slowing the transit time in the intestine.3 Berberine inhibits the ability of bacteria to attach to human cells, which helps prevent infections, particularly in the throat, intestines, and urinary tract.4 These actions, coupled with berberine’s ability to enhance immune cell function,5 make Oregon grape possibly useful for mild infections.
An ointment of Oregon grape has been shown to effectively treat the skin disease psoriasis in a double blind study. Whole Oregon grape extracts were shown in one laboratory study to reduce inflammation (often associated with psoriasis) and to stimulate the white blood cells known as macrophages. In this study, isolated alkaloids from Oregon grape did not have these actions. This suggests that something besides alkaloids are important to the properties of Oregon grape.

The bitter-tasting compounds as well as the alkaloids in Oregon grape root stimulate digestive function.

**How much is usually taken?** A tea can be prepared by boiling 1–3 U.S. teaspoons (5–15 grams) of chopped roots in 500 ml (2 cups) of water for fifteen minutes. After straining and cooling, 3 cups can be drunk per day. Tincture can also be used in the amount of 3 ml three times per day. Since berberine is not well absorbed, Oregon grape root might not provide adequate amounts of this compound to treat significant infections; standardized extracts containing 5–10% alkaloids, which supply 500 mg of berberine each day, can be used in these situations to ensure the necessary amount. A nutritionally oriented physician should be consulted in the case of infection. A 10% extract ointment applied three or more times daily might be useful for psoriasis.

**Are there any side effects or interactions?** Oregon grape is safe in the amounts indicated above. Long-term (more than two to three weeks) use of standardized extracts is not
recommended. Berberine alone has been reported to interfere with normal bilirubin metabolism in infants, raising a concern that it might worsen jaundice.8 For this reason, berberine-containing plants should be used with caution during pregnancy and breast-feeding.

References: