



Information on unauthorised products such as teas or capsules containing senna

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The marketing of products such as teas containing senna leaves and/or senna pods (referred to below as “senna”) as foodstuffs is prohibited in Switzerland^[1]. There are considerable safety concerns in the event of incorrect use or abuse.

Preparations made from senna – which are contained, for example, in herbal teas, capsules, tablets or tinctures – are used as medication to treat occasional constipation for a maximum of two weeks. The substances in senna stimulate the activity of the large intestine and, due to reduced absorption and greater secretion of salts (electrolytes), result in increased intestinal content and softening of the stool.

In addition to potential hypersensitivity reactions such as itching and rashes, cramp-like gastrointestinal symptoms or diarrhoea may also occur at the start of treatment with senna due to its irritant properties. Long-term use may lead to an imbalance in the body's water and salt levels and increased excretion of proteins and blood in the urine. The consequences of this range from muscle weakness to impairment of heart function. This risk is greatly increased when senna is used in combination with other medicinal products such as diuretics, certain heart medicines, certain steroid hormones or preparations containing liquorice root.

Incorrect use of senna over a longer period can also result in increased intestinal sluggishness and can worsen constipation. Liver damage is possible in the case of chronic overdose.

Medicinal products containing preparations made from senna should not be taken for longer than two weeks without a medical prescription and should not be used in children under 12 years or during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Senna products should also not be taken in cases of inflammatory gastrointestinal disorders, intestinal obstructions, kidney disorders, dehydration or known hypersensitivity to one or more of the ingredients.

Advice from a healthcare professional or treatment under medical supervision is essential to achieve the greatest possible benefit and minimise potential risks. Preparations made from senna are therefore only permitted in medicinal products in Switzerland.

However, despite being prohibited as foodstuffs, products containing senna, such as teas, are still on the market illegally or can be ordered online. Some products that claim to be “for detoxification” or “for weight loss” contain senna without declaring it as an ingredient. The ingredients of the products in question should be checked and the claimed properties such as “for detoxification” or “for weight loss” should be questioned critically. In particular when side effects and symptoms such as diarrhoea occur, this may indicate that it is an illegal product.

In addition to senna, such products may also contain other plants with similar properties whose use in foodstuffs is prohibited. Examples include:

^[1] In accordance with Annex 1 of the FDHA Ordinance of 16 December 2016 on Foodstuffs of Vegetable Origin, Fungi and Table Salt (VFO, SR 817.022.17; last revised on 1 July 2020), “List of plants, plant components and preparations derived therefrom whose use in foodstuffs is prohibited”.



English name	Latin name	Name of primary plant(s) (synonyms)
Senna leaves and pods	Sennae folium, Sennae fructus	<i>Senna alexandrina</i> MILL. (syn. <i>Cassia acutifolia</i> DELILE., <i>Cassia angustifolia</i> M. VAHL)
Rhubarb root	Rhei radix	<i>Rheum officinale</i> BAILL.; <i>Rheum palmatum</i> L.
Buckthorn bark	Frangulae cortex	<i>Frangula alnus</i> MILL. (syn. <i>Rhamnus frangula</i> L.)
Cascara sagrada bark/sacred bark/chittern bark	Rhamni purshianae cortex	<i>Rhamnus purshiana</i> DC. (syn. <i>Frangula purshiana</i> (DC.) A. GRAY)
Buckthorn berry	Rhamni cathartici fructus	<i>Rhamnus cathartica</i> L.
Aloe ^[2] (leaf juice concentrate)	Aloe	<i>Aloe ferox</i> MILL., <i>Aloe barbadensis</i> MILL.

The uncontrolled use of products containing such ingredients can harbour considerable health risks. Swissmedic therefore warns urgently against the purchase and consumption of such products from unknown sources. Medicinal products approved by Swissmedic are available in authorised dispensing outlets (pharmacies, drugstores) and can be recognised from the details of the marketing authorisation holder, an authorisation number and dispensing category in the form of a Swissmedic pictogram (licence symbol) on the packaging. The products above containing senna are generally classified in dispensing category D or, at higher doses, in dispensing category B.

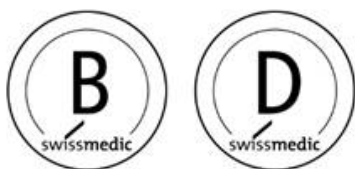


Fig. 1: Licence symbol indicating the dispensing category

^[2] Not to be confused with Aloe vera gel, a product containing carbohydrates obtained solely from the water-storing tissues inside the leaves, which contains no irritants.



Further information

For information on distinguishing therapeutic products from foodstuffs, please refer to "Criteria for distinguishing therapeutic products from foodstuffs with reference to orally administered products", available on the Swissmedic website:

https://www.swissmedic.ch/dam/swissmedic/en/dokumente/marktueberwachung/abrenzungsfragen/mu100_00_002d_mb_abgrenzungskriterien_heilmittel_lebensmittel_publikation.pdf.download.pdf/MU100_00_002d_MB_Abgrenzungskriterien_Heilmittel_Lebensmittel_Publikation.pdf

Change history

Version	Valid and binding from	Description, comments (by author)	Author's initials
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