Uva ursi (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

**Common name:** Bearberry

**Parts used and where grown:** The uva ursi plant is found in colder, northern climates. It has red berries, which bears are said to be fond of. The flowers are also red. The leaf is used.

**Historical or traditional use** (may or may not be supported by scientific studies): The leaves and berries were used by numerous indigenous people from northern latitudes. Native Americans sometimes combined uva ursi with tobacco and smoked it. It was also used as a beverage tea in some places in Russia. The berries were considered beneficial as a weight-loss aid. It was found in wide use for infections of all parts of the body because of its astringent, or “drying,” action.

**Active constituents:** The glycoside arbutin is the active ingredient in uva ursi. Arbutin is present in fairly high amounts (up to 10%) in uva ursi. It has been shown to kill bacteria in the urine. Arbutin undergoes a highly complex process in the body. It is split into a small sugar molecule and a hydroquinone in the intestines, then the liver hooks the hydroquinone to another molecule. This makes it water soluble so it is easily carried via the blood to the kidney. There, if the urine is alkaline, the hydroquinone is released from its carrier. Hydroquinone is a powerful antimicrobial...
agent and is responsible for uva ursi’s ability to treat urinary tract infections. Arbutin has also been shown to increase the anti-inflammatory action of synthetic cortisone.2 No human studies have been published confirming the role of uva ursi in people with urinary tract infections.

**How much is usually taken?** The German Commission E monograph suggests 3 grams of uva ursi in 150 mL of water as an infusion to be taken three to four times daily.3 For alcohol-based tinctures, 5 ml three times per day can be taken. Herbal extracts in capsules or tablets (containing 20% arbutin) in an amount of 250–500 mg three times per day can also be taken. Use of uva ursi should be limited to no more than fourteen days. To ensure alkaline urine, 6–8 grams of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) mixed in a glass of water can be drunk. Baking soda should not be taken for more than fourteen days; as well, individuals with high blood pressure should not take baking soda. People should not use uva ursi to treat an infection without first consulting a physician.

**Are there any side effects or interactions?** Some people may experience nausea after taking uva ursi. Long-term (more than 2–3 weeks) use of uva ursi is not recommended, due to possible side effects from excessive levels of hydroquinone. People should avoid taking acidic agents, such as fruit juice (more than 16 ounces) or vitamin C (more than 500 mg), while using uva ursi. Uva ursi is contraindicated in pregnant or lactating women and should
be used in young children only with the guidance of a healthcare professional.

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