

[Archives](#)

Volume 9 Issue 4
Nov/Dec 2003

[Rebounding: A Defence
Against Cancer](#)

[Why Choose ORGANIC
Poultry?](#)

[Chaga \(Inonotus
obliquus\)
A Medicinal Fungus](#)

[Death, Dying, and
Spirituality](#)

[Natural Reflections
The Planet is a Single
Integrated Life Support
System](#)

[Editorial](#)

Chaga (*Inonotus obliquus*) A Medicinal Fungus

by Kahlee Keane



"He could not imagine any greater joy than to go away into the woods for months on end, to break off this chaga, crumble it, boil it up on a campfire, drink it and get well like an animal. To walk through the forest for months, to know no other care than to get better! Just as a dog goes to search for some mysterious grass that will save him..."
—From *Cancer Ward* by Aleksandr (Alexander) Solzhenitsyn

I read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *Cancer Ward* in the early 70s: it's a painful book in many ways, but an excellent read. My first knowledge of the powerful medicine called "chaga" was found within its pages, however, it would be more than a decade before I would find it for myself.

During the mid-80s I was living on an island off the coast of New Brunswick doing medicinal plant research when I had what some would call a "medicine dream." Central to the dream was the clear image of chaga hugging the trunk of a white birch. It is my belief that this dream came as a reminder of buried knowledge, a rekindling and renewing of interest in the possibilities of this wild medicine.

The dream also gave me "heads up" in a very literal way, for just a few days later I found myself deep in a birch forest on a remote corner of the island looking up at several large conks of chaga, dark and chunky against the delicacy of the birch's white paper bark.

Since that day I have collected information on this fungus and although chaga is not abundant in Canada I have found specimens in the northern regions of most Canadian provinces.

This birch fungus known as chaga or "tsy" has been part of Russia's traditional medicine since the sixteenth century. In recent years its therapeutic qualities have been validated by such people as Dr. Kirsti Kahlos, a pharmacognycist at the University of Helsinki who has been looking at the action of a *triterpenes* called *inotodiol* found in chaga. Kahlos and other researchers have found this constituent active against influenza, inflammation of the stomach and intestines, as well specific tumours.

Recently Sergiy and Katya Nokhrin brought me up to date on the use of chaga in modern day Russia. The Nokhrins told me that historically some Russians drank chaga as a daily beverage just as we do coffee or tea. It has been found that among these groups there is a dramatically low incidence of cancer. These people were unknowingly taking a preventative medicine while enjoying a cup of tasty and inexpensive tea.

The Nokhrins told me that chaga is utilized in hospitals in Russia and the Ukraine via a botanical product called Bifungin, as well as in a tea form or homeopathically. Sergiy was careful to point out that it was not a *cure* for cancer but a medicine that assists the patient to *heal* and strengthen so that they may resume a normal life. Once again we see the traditional or folk medicines being offered to patients along with orthodox treatments.

The following is a more detailed description and information on this interesting fungus:

Sterile conk

The fungus is most frequently encountered in the sterile condition on living trunks. The conks, acting like a wedge, burst through the bark and appear as large gall-like structures, varying in size from 5 to 20 cm diameter, with a very irregular, cracked, and deeply fissured surface.

The structure forces the bark apart, keeping the wound open and allowing the fungus to enter unaffected wood. The conks have a hard, woody to almost stony texture. When removed from the tree the internal surface is rusty brown, somewhat granular in appearance, and is often mottled with whitish or cream-coloured veins.

Fruiting bodies

The fungus fruits on the dead standing or fallen trunk possibly as long as 6 years after the tree has died. The inconspicuous and short-lived fruiting bodies form under the bark extending for several meters over the wood.

Harvesting, Preparation, and Storing: The fresh, sterile conks are gathered from autumn until spring. Taking out the inside layers, cut into slices and gently dry at room temperature or between 50-60°C. Store in airtight containers out of the light.

Part Used: The inside three layers of the sterile conks.

Habitat: This fungus grows mainly on live birch. It is also found on alder and beech trees to a smaller extent.

Therapeutics: Chaga relieves pain and improves a patient's condition by reducing sickness and heartburn. Taken in the early stages of the disease, it can help to prevent further complications.

The fungus is apparently non-toxic and has no side effects. Some sources indicate that while a patient is receiving treatment of this kind, intravenous applications of glucose and penicillin-3 should be discontinued. It is also recommended that the patient's diet should consist mainly of mild vegetables with limited meat and fats; smoked products and strong spices should be avoided.

Physiological action: Alterative. Anodyne. Anti-tumour. Stomachic. Tonic.

Preparation: The dried, shredded inner part of the conk is softened by soaking in cold but previously boiled water for 4 hours. Filter and save both the liquid portion as well as the softened fungus. An infusion is prepared by pouring sterilized boiled water, cooled to 50° C, over the fungus (use a weight ratio of about 1:5 fungus to water). Let stand at room temperature for 48 hours. The mixture is then filtered and the water in which the fungus was originally soaked is added to the filtrate.

Dosage: The infusion can be used for up to 4 days. Three glasses should be taken per 24-hour period, approximately 30 minutes before meals. It takes some 7 kg a month of the fungus for a course of treatment, lasting 4 to 7 months, with short breaks if necessary.

Note: It is important to never overheat the fungus and to treat it as you would yeast, never subjecting it to too much heat or cold.

Chaga is hard to find in the woods and difficult to procure commercially. Check with your health food store, naturopath, or homeopath as to its availability. Some Russian entrepreneurs are harvesting and exporting raw chaga to botanical manufacturers throughout the world. You can check on the internet by searching under chaga or *Inonotus obliquus*. Because of its diverse health benefits it is well worth the search.

Root Woman (Kahlee Keane) is an eco-herbalist and educator with a deep interest in the protection of the wild medicinal plants. Root Woman & Dave's new field guide, The Standing People, contains over 400 colour photographs and information on over 100 plants of the Prairie Provinces. To order send \$29.95 plus \$7 postage to: #27, 2001- 8th St. East, Saskatoon, SK S7H 0T8. Email: rootwoman@sk.sympatico.ca or visit www.connect.to/rootwoman.

[Back to top](#)

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