

Herbal remedies: use with caution

More and more people in North America are using herbal remedies and other traditional or alternative therapies: echinacea for colds, St. John's wort for depression, ginseng for energy or stomach trouble, and many more. They are found in a dizzying array of forms, from raw herbs to teas to pills to lotions. In studies in the United States, up to 45% of parents surveyed said they had given their child one or more herbal products in the past year.

How safe are herbal remedies?

Herbal remedies are often perceived as safer than conventional medicines because they are “natural.” However, “natural” does not mean “benign” or “completely safe.” Like conventional prescription and over-the-counter drugs, herbal remedies contain pharmacologically active ingredients – in some cases, powerful ones. Indeed, up to one-third of our modern conventional medicines were originally derived from plants; ASA (Aspirin) and digitalis are two well-known examples. Like conventional medicines, herbal remedies can have side effects of their own and can interact with other drugs.

Because randomized controlled trials of herbal remedies have only rarely been carried out, particularly in children, we don't have the necessary information on most products to know how frequently they cause side effects or adversely affect other actions of other drugs. However, many individual cases of side effects linked to herbal remedies have been published. These range from minor side effects, such as headache and rash, to life-threatening side effects such as cerebral haemorrhage, anaphylaxis, and liver failure.

Contamination of herbal remedies is another concern. One study examined 260 Asian patent medicines and found that a quarter of them were contaminated with heavy metals such as cadmium, lead, mercury, or arsenic. Another 7% contained various conventional medicines, including steroids, ethinyl estradiol, and warfarin. Several cases of poisoning or developmental delay due to heavy metal contamination have been reported.

On January 1, 2004, Health Canada began phasing in new regulations for natural health products sold in Canada, including herbal remedies, vitamins, and mineral supplements. When the transition period is complete, in 2010, all such products must be licensed by Health Canada's Natural Health Products Directorate. Licensed products will bear an eight-digit licence number, which means that Health Canada has reviewed and approved the product for safety and efficacy. Manufacturers and

importers must meet Health Canada's manufacturing standards to ensure safety and quality. They must also report any serious adverse reactions to their products to Health Canada. It is to be hoped that these new standards will reduce the possibility of contamination, and also give us more information about side effects and herb-drug interactions. In the meantime, however, people who use natural products must be aware of the potential dangers.

If herbal remedies are safe, are they effective?

Most herbal remedies have not been studied in randomized controlled trials. They are often recommended based on "traditional" use – that is, they have been used for a particular purpose for a long time. However, it is not always clear whether they have the promised effect. Health Canada's new labelling system for natural products distinguishes between "scientific" and "traditional" health claims, but the use of traditional claims means that many products will be sold that have not been studied in a systematic way. There is no scientific proof that "traditional claims" are accurate.

Even if a remedy has been studied scientifically, there are still potential problems. Conventional medicines are manufactured under standard conditions and closely monitored to ensure that levels of active ingredients are consistent. This is much harder to accomplish with herbal remedies. First of all, herbal remedies contain many different substances, so it is not always clear which component or components have an effect on health. Second, plants grown under different conditions can have different levels of active ingredients. A number of studies have shown that different batches or brands of the same herbal product may have very different properties. Finally, how the plants are processed may also cause changes in their ingredients. As a result, it is difficult to standardize natural products, and people may get very different doses and different effects from the same herbal remedy.

Using herbal remedies

As with any medical treatment, people who plan to use herbal remedies should know about their correct use, intended effects, and possible side effects. This is particularly true for people with chronic health conditions, people taking conventional medicines, and children. Children's bodies process drugs differently than adults do, so an herbal remedy that is safe for an adult may be dangerous to a child. Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding should be even more cautious about herbal remedies than they are about conventional medicines, because there is less information available.

Communication is essential: many people do not mention their use of herbal products to their doctor or pharmacist, and many doctors and pharmacists do not think to ask if their patients are taking an herbal product. This increases the risk of drug interactions, and may cause serious side effects to be overlooked. Report any suspected side effects to your doctor immediately. If your doctor asks what medicines you are taking, mention the herbal products as well as the conventional ones.

Finally, always keep in mind that claims for what an herbal product can do may not be scientifically proven, that the contents of products may vary, and that side effects are possible.

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