

Features

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Know how to use herbs safely to prevent problems

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

Herbal supplements are dietary supplements that contain a plant or part of a plant used for its flavor, scent or potential therapeutic properties. It can include the flowers, leaves, bark, fruit, seeds, stems and roots, either singly or in mixtures.

Many herbs have a long history of use with staunch supporters who swear by their health benefits. However, if you are considering using herbs, there are several important points you should keep in mind.

- 1. Herbal supplements can act in the same way as drugs.** Just because an herbal supplement is labeled "natural" does not mean it is safe or without any harmful effects. Some herbs can be harmful in large or prolonged dosages, addictive after long-term improper use or toxic. Herbs should never be used indiscriminately, or on a daily basis, without the proper guidance of a health care professional or someone trained in the use of herbs.
- 2. Some herbal supplements are known to interact with medications** in ways that cause health problems. For example:
 - a. A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that complications could arise during surgery and anesthesia as the result of the use of herbal medications. As a result, the American Society of Anesthesiologists recommends that all patients stop herbal medications at least two to three weeks prior to surgery to avoid the possibility of interactions and complications. Herbs in the study that were said to be potentially problematic included Ginkgo biloba, garlic, ginseng, Saint-John's-wort, ephedra, kava, echinacea and valerian.
 - b. Ginseng, according to research, can increase blood pressure, making it dangerous for those trying to keep their blood pressure under control.
 - c. Ginseng, garlic or supplements containing ginger, when taken with the blood-thinning drug Coumadin, can cause bleeding episodes.
 - d. Garlic capsules combined with diabetes medication can cause a dangerous decrease in blood sugars.
- 3. Published analyses of herbal supplements have often found differences between what's listed on the label and what's in the bottle.** This means that you may be taking less, or more, of the supplement than what the label indicates. Use herbs from reputable manufacturers.
- 4. Some herbal supplements have been found to be contaminated** with metals, unlabeled prescription drugs, micro-organisms or other substances.
- 5. Herbs are often sold on Web sites that make incorrect statements and use deceptive practices.** It's important to work with a health care professional or person trained in the use of herbs and to use only herbs from reputable companies.
- 6. More is not better.** Many people think that "if a little makes me feel better, a lot will make me feel fantastic." This is not the case with herbs. Dosages need to be carefully controlled, as with any medicine. It is possible to overdose on some herbs. You must give them time to work and support them with a proper diet, exercise and proper attention to yourself.
- 7. One dose does not fit all.** The dose must fit the individual and must be based on the illness treated, your past and present medical history, your age, weight and several other factors.

8. **Remember is to tell your doctor what you are taking**, whether it's a prescribed medication, an over-the-counter drug, an herb or another kind of supplement.
9. **Always make sure you talk to someone who has knowledge and training in herbs and supplements** and knows the human body.
10. **Buy products from companies that are well-known** with established reputations and quality.
11. **Don't self-medicate** and assume that what is sold is "harmless."
12. **If you are taking several products, write the names and dose on a slip of paper and put it in your wallet** or pocket where it can be found if you need emergency health care. Some people use medical bracelets stating what they are taking and their medical information.