

How safe are herbal therapies?

The act of self-medicating can be harmful for many reasons and in many ways with herbal remedies.

The origin of herbal (plant-derived) or natural medicines, also known as herbalism, can be traced back to ancient times. The prescribing of herbs has also been called "traditional" or "folk medicine" and is sometimes used by naturopaths in alternative or complementary therapies. Herbalism has become increasingly popular in recent years due to strong advertising campaigns in magazines, on television and on the Internet. Many of these advertisements target our aging population who often suffer from a variety of illnesses and may already be taking prescription or over-the-counter (non-prescription) medications.

Many people try herbal remedies because they believe their prescribed, conventional medications are either too expensive or not effective enough. Some try herbal therapies out of curiosity or because their friends or family have recommended them. Often, people don't know why they are taking a particular herb.

Speak to your doctor

In many cases, people use herbal medications without their doctor's knowledge. However, the act of self-medicating can be harmful. It may cause a person to neglect a condition that may respond to timely professional therapy, or the herbal product may cause ill effects or interact with other medications the individual may be taking. For these reasons it is extremely important that your doctor is told about all medications you take.

Many people believe herbal therapies are harmless because they are derived from nature. However, an estimated 25 per cent of all modern drugs have a natural or plant origin. Thus, medicinal herbs must be considered drugs that have the power to help or harm a person. Some of the concerns surrounding herbal therapies involve possible drug interactions, lack of information about the long-term safety of using them and quality control issues.

There are many cases where drug interactions have occurred between natural products and conventional and/or non-prescription drugs, as well as between two or more herbal products themselves. Some of these interactions can be life-threatening. For example, numerous herbs can affect bleeding time, such as dong quai, ginko biloba, ginseng, chondroitin, fish oil, garlic, ginger, alfalfa, flaxseed, and many others. For many people this may not pose a problem; however for those who take blood thinners such as warfarin this interaction may increase the chances of bruising/bleeding or, alternatively, the formation of blood clots.



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Women's health corner

Many herbs can affect other body functions such as blood pressure, blood sugar metabolism and mental functioning and can alter the effectiveness of certain prescription or non-prescription medicines.

Can be toxic

Medical journals have reported numerous examples of side effects and/or unwanted adverse effects from herbal medicines. These effects include severe liver or

kidney toxicity, allergic or skin reactions and more. Since the manufacturer rarely discloses this information, the consumer may be unaware of the potential adverse effects. Furthermore many cases are likely to go unreported since reporting of adverse reactions is voluntary.

Health Canada closely regulates herbal preparations in Canada to ensure the products contain high quality ingredients, are safe to use and are properly labeled with dosage instructions. Approved products are granted a Natural Products Number (NPN) or Drug Identification Number for Homeopathic Medicines (DIN-HM). These are similar to the drug identification numbers assigned to non-prescription medications. If a product does not bear one of these numbers, the quality, purity and strength cannot be guaranteed.

Check federal website

Many countries do not have safety regulations, and products purchased through the Internet and abroad may therefore not always be safe. Many products have been found to contain pharmaceutical ingredients or other plant species which had not been disclosed on the labels. In other cases, products do not contain any of the herb named on the label. Random sampling has detected contamination with heavy metals such as lead, arsenic or mercury in some products. Health Canada regularly advises the public on its website about product recalls for such issues.

It is important for anyone who is thinking about using a herbal medicine to obtain accurate information about the product. It is best to consult with a certified professional who has unbiased, fact-based information as opposed to someone selling a product. There are several reputable sources – such as Health Canada and the National Institute of Health – for people who prefer to do their own research. Pharmacists also have reliable sources of information they can turn to and they can provide advice regarding possible drug interactions.

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