

Herbal Remedies

What are herbal remedies?

Herbal Remedies are products originating from plants or plant extracts used for their medicinal properties. They are taken for various reasons such as:

- self healing
- treating disease or cancer
- strengthening the body's immune system
- curing common ailments
- promoting general health

Herbal Remedies include traditional herbal medicines, traditional Chinese, Ayurvedic (East Indian) and Native American medicine, homeopathic preparations, and vitamin and mineral supplements. Natural Remedies are sold in grocery stores, pharmacies and health food stores and they do not require prescriptions from a doctor.

Natural Doesn't Mean Safe

We now know that any substance (natural or synthetic) that has an effect on the body, has the potential to be a serious risk to health. Most herbal products have a long history of safe use. However, they can be dangerous if dosages are not followed correctly or if the products are ingested over a long period of time. It is possible to develop an allergy to herbal medicines. They contain chemicals that are as potent as a prescription drug. Serious side-effects of herbal remedies can include stroke, heart attacks, heart rate irregularities, seizure and even death.

Why you should consult your doctor before taking Herbal Remedies:

Treat herbal remedies the same way you would a prescription medication and consult your doctor before making a decision to take them. Some herbal remedies are effective and safe but most have not been studied enough to say that they are either safe or effective. Many products imported from other countries may not have all the ingredients listed, may not be in childproof containers, and may

contain prescription drugs that are not listed on the label. Herbal remedies can change the way prescription drugs work. They may decrease or increase the effect of drugs. This may cause serious side effects or be poisonous or dangerous. Natural health products are not subject to federal regulations, however Health Canada is phasing in guidelines and regulations which will be fully enforced in 2008.

Minimizing Your Risk:

- Don't assume natural means safe.
- Buy products with a DIN number
- Stop taking them at least 2 weeks before surgery
- Be skeptical about health-related claims
- Be aware of any reaction or interactions with other drugs
- Always bring in the bottle to talk about it with your doctor

Menopause and herbal remedies

Soy products:

Soy contains isoflavones. This group of chemicals has a very mild estrogen effect in some tissues. Because of this effect, capsules of isoflavones alone and soy protein containing isoflavones have been recommended to treat menopausal symptoms. Soy protein may help in short-term treatment of mild menopausal symptoms however, isolated isoflavones are not helpful. Soy milk contains a very low amount of isoflavones compared to soy protein. The effect of soy on estrogen dependent cancers remains unknown.

Black Cohosh and Remifemin:

Used for hot flashes, sleep and mood disturbance, the studies done so far have not shown any harmful effects but there have been no placebo controlled trials.

Evening Primrose Oil:

Used for hot flashes and premenstrual syndrome (PMS), it contains an essential fatty acid, gamma linoleic acid. It contains fat calories! No studies have shown any improvement compared to placebo.



Dong Quai:

Used for hot flashes, studies show no improvement compared to placebo. There may be toxic effects! It interacts with blood thinners and may cause bleeding problems. Not for use in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Ginseng:

Used to increase interest in sex and overall energy, studies have not shown any improvement compared to placebo.

St. John's Wort:

Used to treat mild depression, studies show an improvement in mood. Using this product more than two years is not suggested. It should be stopped two weeks before surgery and not taken with a prescribed antidepressant.

Valerian Root:

Used for sleeplessness, studies do not show any improvement.

Wild and Mexican Yam Cream:

Creams containing wild yam do not have any hormonal effect unless synthetic estrogen or progesterone hormones have been added. Plants do not make cholesterol which is needed to make steroid hormones.

Herbal Remedies in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

Women are told to avoid medication during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Any medication should be taken on the advice of their doctor after reviewing any effect it may have on them or their baby.

The same advice applies to herbal remedies. Some herbs cause miscarriage while others can affect the growth and development of your baby. It is best to avoid herbal remedies in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. Younger children should also avoid herbs.

Safe:

- Raspberry leaf tea is safe and is believed to have positive qualities

The following herbs may be used in limited amounts: (as herbs, not in products)

- Ginger
- Peppermint

Safety has not yet been established, these herbs are best avoided:

- Echinacea
- Evening primrose Oil
- Ginkgo
- St. John's Wort
- Tea Tree Oil

The following herbs can be bad for your health and are to be avoided:

- Black Cohosh
- Burdock
- Calendula
- Chaste Tree
- Dong Quai
- Feverfew
- Ginseng
- Hops
- Juniper
- Kava
- Licorice (as an herb)
- Passionflower
- Valerian
- Uva-ursi
- Wild Yam
- Blue cohosh to stimulate labour is dangerous

The biggest challenge for consumers is getting the right information. Consumers should distinguish between testimonial evidence and clinical studies. Herbal remedies may relieve some symptoms and some women find that taking herbal supplements helpful.

Need More Info?

More information on natural health products and the new NHP Regulations can be found on the Natural Health Products Directorate Web site at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/nhpd-dpsn/index_e.html.