

Herbal Supplements: Which Ones are Valid?

Herbs have been used throughout history as a means of enhancing health, curing illness, or preventing illness. Until recently, the American population, including medical professionals, touted medicinal benefits of herbs to be “folklore” or “old wives tales.” Scientific research is beginning to dispel the belief that the medicinal benefits of herbs are folklore. While research has proven the beneficial effects of some herbs, many of the herbal claims for efficacy have been proven to be false or harmful.

How are herbs regulated?

In the United States, herbs are not regulated as drugs under federal law. Legal standards for processing, harvesting or packaging are not applied when herbs are manufactured. Some companies apply their own standards, but many do not.

Since most medicine is made from plants, isn’t an herbal supplement better?

It is true that the active compounds in plants provide the structural basis for much of the manufactured medicines. However, the drug companies have isolated the active compounds found in herbs in order to ensure the proper dosage is present when the medicine is consumed. When herbs are consumed in an over-the-counter supplement, the amount present in the herb isn’t guaranteed. Another disadvantage to herbal supplements is that there may be other compounds in the herb that have not been classified. Some of the agents may have beneficial effects, while some could be harmful.

What information should the label contain?

When looking at the label of an herbal supplement, it is important to look for the following: name of the product; Latin name of the plant; plant part; statement of nutritional support; and the FDA disclaimer, “This product has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.”

Recommendations for using herbs

- Always seek a diagnosis from a physician before taking herbs, especially for serious conditions. Inform your health care provider of herbs you are currently taking.
- Stop taking an herb if you have an adverse reaction.
- Do not take herbs if you are pregnant or nursing.

Guide to Proven Herbal Remedies

Herb	What it is used for	How it may work	Cautions
Bilberry	Simple diarrhea.	By containing pectin, a soluble fiber that counteracts diarrhea. By acting as an antioxidant and preventing damage to small blood vessels.	Do not use the leaves of the Bilberry plant. Fresh berries have a laxative effect. Bilberry may prolong blood coagulation, so be cautious if taking other blood-thinning agents such as aspirin, warfarin (Coumadin), Vitamin E, fish oils, garlic or ginger.
Chamomile	Acts as an anti-inflammatory agent and mild sedative. Used to ease gastric upset and for skin inflammations and irritations.	By relaxing intestinal spasms. Depresses central nervous system activity.	Few cases of allergy have been reported.
Cranberry Juice	Prevent or treat bladder infections, urinary tract infections.	By inhibiting adhesion of bacteria to urinary tract walls.	No adverse reactions reported.
Echinacea	Colds, flu	By boosting the immune system.	Do not take if you have an autoimmune disease such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, arthritis, or if you are HIV positive.

Herb	What it is used for	How it may work	Cautions
Feverfew	Preventing and treating migraines and associated nausea and vomiting.	Inhibits release of serotonin, which has been implicated in migraines.	A potential allergen for those sensitive to ragweed. Stomach upset may occur in the first week. Discontinue use if mouth sores develop.
Garlic	Use for hyperlipidemia, arteriosclerosis, and mildly elevated blood pressure.	Works by inhibiting platelet aggregation, prevents LDL oxidation, lowers cholesterol, and acts as a peripheral vasodilator.	May cause an allergic reaction, gastric upset, garlic odor. Do not use with other anticoagulants such as aspirin.
Ginger	Motion sickness, nausea, and indigestion.	By promoting secretion of saliva & digestive juices, neutralizing stomach acids and toxins, increasing tone & movement in intestines.	May aggravate gallstones. Excessive amounts may cause heartburn.
Ginkgo	Age-related decline in mental function. Vertigo, ringing in the ear, and leg cramping due to poor blood supply.	Thins the blood, which increases circulation in the brain and extremities. Acts as an antioxidant.	May cause gastrointestinal upset, headaches, allergic skin reactions. Be careful of combining with other blood thinners. For serious mental decline, consult physician.
Saw Palmetto	Though it lessens symptoms, it does not reduce prostate size. Helps initiate and increase urine flow, and decreases frequency of urination.	By counteracting androgenic hormones and fighting inflammation. Has a diuretic, antiseptic and immune stimulating effect.	Rarely causes stomach upset and headaches. Large amounts may cause diarrhea. Prostate enlargement requires diagnosis and follow-up by a physician.
St. John's Wort	Mild-to-moderate depression.	Initially believed to work similarly to monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) drugs. Presently believed to work by influencing brain serotonin levels.	Do not use with prescription antidepressants. Do not use for severe depression. May cause photosensitivity in people with fair skin: if so, avoid bright sunlight.
Valerian	Insomnia, mild anxiety, restlessness.	By acting as a mild tranquilizer and depressing the central nervous system. Also by relieving muscle spasms.	Do not use with other sedatives or anti-depressants. May cause mild, temporary stomach upset. If insomnia persists, consult a physician.

Recommended Web Pages

American Dietetic Association at <http://www.eatright.org>

Food and Drug Administration at <http://www.fda.gov>

Herb Homepage at <http://www.herbalgram.com>

Quackwatch Homepage at <http://www.quackwatch.com>

References

Environmental Nutrition Newsletter, May, 1998, pp. 1, 4-5.

Barrett, Stephen, M.D., *The Herbal Minefield*, Quackwatch Homepage.

Herbal Remedies: What Health Professionals Need to Know, April 18, 1998, Champaign, IL, Dr. Charlotte Glyenhael.

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu>