

Herbal medicine

Family Health Center

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Herbs have been used to treat sickness for thousands of years. Over the ages medicinal plants were felt to have many magical and mystical powers. Today we understand many of the physical and chemical principles that explain the medicinal properties of plants. They are, after all, the original source of one third of our modern synthetic medicines.

Americans spend \$700 million a year on herbal remedies. The truth is that despite their increasing availability and popularity, most supplements haven't been proven safe or effective, at least in this country. What separates plant derived drugs from herbal supplements is careful scientific study. By law, companies can sell whatever supplements they please, so long as its label makes no claim to treat disease. There is no regulation of product safety or quality. Although some studies in the last few years have shown impressive results from a number of herbs, other plant extracts have proven to be more harmful than helpful, sometimes even fatal. The result is that people have to be extremely careful. They need to read labels skeptically, avoid herbal combinations, and look for standardized extracts. Herbs should be purchased only from reputable sources. It's especially important for people with serious conditions and those who take prescription drugs to discuss any supplements with their physicians. Pregnant women and children should avoid herbal supplements altogether since there is virtually no medical information about them in these groups. A brief review of some popular herbal medicines follows:

Chamomile

The dried flower heads of a member of the daisy family, *Matricaria recutita*, are used to prepare a tea popular for various digestive complaints. Oil present in chamomile tea has antispasm and antiinflammatory effects on the intestinal tract, and the tea is widely used for irritable bowel syndrome. It has mild sedative effect.

Chamomile tea is made by pouring boiling water over a tablespoonful of the flower heads and steeping for 10 minutes. This is drunk 3-4 times per day. An allergic reaction can occur in anyone who is sensitive to daisy or ragweed plants.

Dong Quai

One of the most popular herbs in China and Japan, dong quai represents both the promise and the uncertainty of traditional remedies. Chinese and Japanese women have long taken dong quai to regulate

their menstrual cycles or to ease cramps, yet it has never been well studied. Dong quai is rich in vitamin B-12 and contains compounds known as coumarins that help relieve cramping and regulate blood flow. However, dong quai can cause fever, excessive menstrual bleeding, and sun sensitivity. Most herb experts do not recommend its use.

Echinacea

Derived from the leaves, flowers, and roots of *Echinacea purpurea*, studies of Echinacea suggest a reduction in severity and duration of symptoms when used to treat the common cold. There is no effect when taken routinely to prevent respiratory infection. Approximately 1-3 milliliters of Echinacea juice is given 2-5 times per day with food. Treatment should be started soon after the onset of symptoms. Serious side effects are rare but include worsening of asthma or rash. Minor adverse effects include upset stomach, nausea, and dizziness.

Ginkgo

The best studied and most popular herb in Europe, ginkgo is prescribed more than 5 million times per year in Germany alone. It comes from the *Ginkgo biloba* plant species, one of the oldest plants on earth. Numerous European studies have shown it can improve blood flow in the brain and the extremities, and alleviate vertigo and ringing in the ears. In the United States it's often advertised as a smart pill. But, according to the experts, for someone with a normal brain, it does not improve function whatsoever. However, its primary target audience is for those with some form of memory loss or dementia, mostly elderly people. Ginkgo is usually given as 120 to 240 milligrams daily divided into 2 or 3 doses for period up to 3 months.

The evidence of safety is solid. Less than 1% of patients suffer side effects, mostly minor stomachache, headache, or rash which usually went away even with continued use.

Ginseng

Ginseng has a reputation as an aphrodisiac, muscle builder, cancer fighter and stress reducer. There is no evidence that it enhances sexual performance or potency. Other research is showing that it may halt the buildup of cholesterol in the arteries.

Taking ginseng in large doses or long term can cause high blood pressure, nervousness, insomnia, sedation, painful breasts and vaginal bleeding.

Ma Huang

Also called ephedra, this extract contains ephedrine (used to treat asthma) and pseudoephedrine (found in nasal decongestants), which have stimulant and airway dilating effects and has been promoted for weight loss and energy increase. It has been mixed with caffeine to increase its stimulant properties. Also used as a legal alternative to methamphetamine, the product was the most widely used herbal supplement in this country until the reports of adverse effects began to appear. These problems, particularly common when ma huang is taken in large doses, include palpitations, anxiety, nerve damage, and stroke. There have been more than 800 reports of adverse effects including 20-30 deaths possibly associated with its use.

If taken at all, the daily dose should not exceed 24 milligrams for not more than a week. People with high blood pressure, heart conditions, thyroid disease, diabetes or glaucoma should completely avoid it.

Saint-John's-wort

This herb, derived from a yellow-flowered plant *Hypericum perforatum*, is the most popular antidepressant in Germany: One brand alone outsells Prozac seven to one. It has been popular since 1984 in Europe as a natural remedy for depression. In 1996 an article in Britain summarized the results of 23 studies on the herb, most done in Germany. Saint-John's-wort worked nearly three times better than placebo for mild to moderate depression and had fewer side effects than the drugs. Unfortunately the studies were short, about 8 weeks, which leave questions about relapse or late side effects. A three year study is now underway in the United States. It is recommended for mild to moderate depression only. The optimum dosage appears to be 300 milligrams of 0.3% extract of hypericum three times a day, probably for a minimum of four weeks.

Side effects include restlessness, stomach irritation, and mild allergic reactions. So far there have been no reported deaths. The biggest concern is that the herb might make some people dangerously sensitive to the sun since animals like sheep have become fatally ill after ingesting large quantities of the plant during exposure to the sun. Therefore, if one has a history of hypersensitivity to the sun or is taking other drugs with a similar side effect like tetracycline then Saint-John's-wort should not be used. Patients should also avoid combining it with prescribed antidepressant or altering the dosages of those antidepressants without first consulting their doctor.

Saw Palmetto

In the past half century a number of large clinical trials have indicated that this berry is a worthwhile treatment for an enlarged prostate known as benign prostate hypertrophy or BPH. One study showed 88% of patients considered the saw palmetto therapy a success.

About half of all men over the age of 50 have enlarged prostates.

Saw palmetto doesn't actually shrink the prostate, but rather relieves symptoms, such as the frequent need to urinate. The usual recommended dose is 0.5 to 1 gram of the dried berry or 0.6 to 1.5 milliliters of extract per day. The herb creates no problems if taken with other drugs and causes only rare stomach ache. It should not be used by men unless they have been evaluated by a physician to exclude the possibility of prostate cancer as a cause of the symptoms.

Valerian

This herb has been used to treat a variety of ills since the first century, when Greek physicians called it *phu*, a word that shares a root with our *phew* in reference to its dirty socks odor. It comes from the dried roots of *Valeriana officinalis*, which grows wild in northeastern US and throughout Europe. It is widely used in Europe - the French buy more than 50 tons each year - in part because it is exceptionally safe.

It is primarily used as a sleep-inducing agent and mild sedative. One study showed 89% of people reported improved sleep. Most people who use it report no hangover effect. Addiction has not been reported with valerian, nor has there been any risk associated with overdose. In some cases it has actually been used to break addiction to prescription sleep aids.

Valerian can be taken in several forms. A tea in which 1 teaspoon of the dried herb has been steeped can be drunk several times daily for anxiety. For insomnia, 400 milligrams of the tincture extract or 2-3 grams of the powdered root or extract is taken before bedtime. About 5-10% of people may have opposite stimulatory effects.

In summary

- Don't assume that herbs will cure everything, or that they can substitute for medications your physician has prescribed for you.
- Take only one herb at a time.
- Start with low doses. Don't take herbal medicines in larger quantities than recommended or longer than necessary.
- Like drugs, herbs can have side effects and interact with other drugs.
- Talk to your doctor about any supplements you plan to take.
- For more information, contact the American Botanical Council at (512) 331-8868 or online <http://www.herbalgram.org/>