

QUESTIONS PATIENTS ASK



HERBS: WHAT'S SAFE AND EFFECTIVE?

I see so many new products that include herbs. How can I know which of them will be safe and effective for me?

People often say to me that they are taking herbs and feeling very safe about it because "herbs are natural, so they can't hurt." My answer: "Hemlock is natural, and it will probably kill you."

Of course, when used appropriately, herbs tend to have fewer side effects than many medications and are more gentle. If a substance is used wrongly, however, it can do harm. Even familiar herbs, like the spices in your kitchen, when used in too-large amounts, can be deadly. The same is true with herbal medicinals: Substances that are safe in small amounts over short periods of time can be harmful if used beyond those limits. Ephedra (also called *ma huang*), which has been in the news, is one of these herbs. So we need to respect the potency of natural substances. Self-help and self-medication are not always the same.

Another issue: Even if an herb is gentle, is it appropri-

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ate for *this particular person*?

Even well-known herbs, generally considered safe, can be dangerous for some people under certain conditions. You may have read many good reports about an herb and know people who are taking it. Yet you still need to know it's right for *you*: Will it adversely affect any conditions you may have, such as diabetes or high blood pressure? Does it interact with your other medications, over-the-counter as well as prescription drugs? It could be dangerous, for example, to take *ginkgo biloba* with a blood thinner like Coumadin. Doctors practicing conventional medicine may lack information about herb interaction, but some (not all) herbalists and pharmacists can help answer your questions.

Western-style herbology mostly uses single herbs. Chinese herbal medicines, however, are more complex. Of-

ten these mixtures of herbs are designed to treat a *pattern* of disharmony, not just symptoms. So to use these medicines well, one needs to know the pattern, the Oriental medical diagnosis. A patient asked me to get a Chinese patent medicine for him because he read on the internet that it was the best remedy for prostatitis. I told him I thought it didn't fit his pattern, but he tried it anyway. He found that he got very agitated and that the formula didn't help. When we switched to a formula that fit his pattern (as well as symptoms), he got relief.

One further caution: Consider the safety and purity of the herbal products themselves. A large number of Chinese patent medicines from PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong have been found to contain heavy metals like lead and arsenic, and even prescription medications. (In fact, this happens all over the

world. I myself found a dandruff shampoo from Spain that contained unlabeled steroids.) Some companies do have good quality products, but you need to know which. Generally, those products manufactured by U.S. and British companies are correctly labeled. Be especially cautious about herbal products made in China.

So be cautious: If you have symptoms that arise after taking an herbal product, stop taking it. And start one product at a time, so you know what to stop!

No herb is right and safe for every one. If you have complex medical problems, it is best to talk with someone. Many herbalists take hundreds of hours in training to learn how to use these substances most effectively.

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