

What You Should Know About Herbal Medicines

What are herbal medicines?

Herbal medicines are also known as “botanical medicines” or “folk medicines.” Herbal medicines involve the use of plants (i.e., botanicals) for medical purposes. Various parts of a plant such as the seeds, berries, roots, leaves, bark, or flowers might be used in the medicine.

Herbal medicines have been available for centuries and are very popular throughout the world. Herbal products are also sometimes referred to as “nutraceuticals,” although nutraceuticals include a much broader range of products than just herbal medicines.

How are herbal medicines regulated?

Herbal medicines are considered to be **dietary supplements** by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Dietary supplements do not have to be reviewed or approved by the FDA for safety and effectiveness before they are marketed. So, there is no government guarantee that herbal products will either benefit you or be safe. If a product is found to be harmful, the FDA is responsible for taking action against that product.

Dietary supplements may not be promoted for the treatment, prevention, or cure of any medical condition. A supplement may state that it can treat a nutrient deficiency, can support health, or help general body function (such as “improve energy”) if the manufacturer has done research to support this claim. The product label must also say, **"This statement has not been evaluated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease."**

Manufacturers will soon be required to follow FDA guidelines for good manufacturing practices. This means that the product must contain the ingredients listed on the label. The amount of ingredients in the tablet or capsule must also be the same as listed. The product must also be manufactured in a safe way, to help prevent contamination by other impurities. Once fully implemented, the FDA guidelines will help ensure that your herbal medicine has the correct ingredients, proper labeling and packaging, and contains no contamination.

Right now, there is no guarantee that the ingredients on the label are actually in the product in the amounts listed. There may also be safety concerns about the way in which the product was made. Until the FDA guidelines are completely in force, be aware that there may be problems with the quality of some herbal products.

If you see the words “standardized,” “verified,” or “certified” on an herbal product box, it does not necessarily ensure it is a good quality product. Instead, look for a mark on the label that says **“USP VERIFIED.”** The letters “USP” stand for the United States Pharmacopeia. The USP is a professional organization that verifies the quality, purity, and potency of selected herbal products. However, the USP does NOT ensure that these products will work or that they will be safe.

What medical conditions can be treated with herbal products?

Herbal products have been claimed to be effective for a wide variety of medical conditions. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence (i.e., scientific studies) for many of these claims to prove that the herbal product is both effective and safe. For certain conditions, an herbal product might have some benefit. However, even in these cases herbal medicines are generally used to supplement and not replace other types of therapy. It is not unusual to have someone take both an herbal product and a prescription medicine for the same condition. Examples of a few herbal products are listed below along with certain medical conditions that they might help. Talk to your doctor or other health care provider before you use any herbal product to find out if it would be effective and safe for you.

Herbal product	Possibly effective for:
Ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba)	Blood circulation problems

Valerian (<i>Valeriana officinalis</i>)	Insomnia
St. John's wort	Depression
Ginger	Nausea, vomiting

Can herbal medicines cause side effects or interact with food or other medicines?

People may believe that herbal medicines are safe because they are “natural.” But, “natural” does not always mean safe. Herbal medicines can have harmful side effects. For example, the herbs comfrey and kava can cause serious damage to the liver.

Herbal medicines may also interact with foods, medications, other dietary supplements (e.g., vitamins) or medical conditions. These interactions could cause you to become very sick. For example, the herb St. John's wort can interact with several medications. St. John's wort should not be taken with antidepressants, birth control pills, warfarin, and many other medicines. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before beginning an herbal product to make sure it is safe for you and that it will not interact with your other medicines. If you have any serious side effects from an herbal medicine, report it to the FDA by calling 1-800-FDA-1088.

Where can you find out more information about herbal medicines?

First, talk to your health care providers to get their advice about whether an herbal product might help you. Pharmacists have special training about herbal products and they can be a good source of information. They can also check to see if there are possible side effects or interactions that could be harmful. If you decide to take an herbal product, your pharmacist can help you locate ones that are USP Verified for purity and quality.

For more information or to get answers to specific questions, go to **JustAskBlue.com**. Other Internet sites with useful information about herbal medicines include:

- Tips For The Savvy Supplement User: Making Informed Decisions And Evaluating Information (FDA); <http://www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/ConsumerInformation/ucm110567.htm>
- Herbal Medicine (Medline Plus); <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/herbalmedicine.html>

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