

Herbal Health: Using Herbal Supplements Wisely

There are a plethora of suggestions and advice on taking herbs for health reasons. How can we begin to make informed decisions about what works, what is a fraud and what is safe? This lesson will take a look at defining herbal health, where to find safe information, and some of the more problematic herbs on the market.

What is Herbal Health?

People have been using herbs for symptoms of illness since before the Middle Ages. A new interest in taking herbs as supplements to improve health has emerged. Before talking about what herbs are safe and useful, it helps to have some words defined to reduce confusion and increase consistency. The **National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)** has several terms that they use for ease and conformity.

Herbal Supplements: A type of dietary supplement using an herb or mixture of herbs. Herbs are a plant or plant part that is used for its flavor, taste or therapeutic properties. These may also be called botanicals.

Dietary Supplements: The following definition was found on the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine website:
Dietary supplements were defined in a law passed by Congress in 1994 called the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). According to DSHEA, a dietary supplement is a product that:

- *Is intended to supplement the diet*
- *Contains one or more dietary ingredients (including vitamins, minerals, herbs or other botanicals, amino acids, and certain other substances) or their constituents*
- *Is intended to be taken by mouth, in forms such as tablet, capsule, powder, softgel, gelcap, or liquid*
- *Is labeled as being a dietary supplement.*

<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiseuse.htm>

Conventional medicine: “(also called Western or allopathic medicine) is medicine as practiced by holders of M.D. (medical doctor) and D.O. (doctor of osteopathic medicine) degrees and by allied health professionals, such as physical therapists, psychologists, and registered nurses.”
<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatisacam/>

Alternative Medicine: using various systems of healing or treating disease that are not included in conventional medicine and used in place of conventional medicine.

Complementary Medicine: using alternative medicine along with conventional medicine.

Where do we find safe information?

Unfortunately, since herbs are naturally found, the Food and Drug Administration does not have the same strict rules for sales of herbs as they do for drugs. The manufacturers of the supplements have the responsibility to ensure that their products are safe. They also have the responsibility of ensuring that any claims on the label are true. They can use any research to establish a claim as long as they have a disclaimer that the FDA has not approved the product for that use. The FDA can only act if, after sold, the product is found to be unsafe or have a false claim.

What does this mean to consumers?

You have to be careful about what supplements you buy. You also, have to be careful for your source of information about an herb's effectiveness.

First, products can differ greatly from manufacturer to manufacturer. Even if a label says “standardized” or “certified”, the amount of the active ingredient may vary due to processing and storage. Also, do not assume “natural” is safe. For example, mistletoe, raw and unprocessed, is poisonous. However, some clinics in Europe have been using processed European Mistletoe injections for cancer patients. Do your research and make sure that any claim is substantiated by trusted resources.

So, how do we know if the information on the product is true?

Find a research based source. Two great science based sources include your health care provider and the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM).

Health Care Provider: Your health care provider may not know about a dietary or herbal supplement when you first ask. However, they will have access

to the latest warnings or guidelines about taking a supplement. They will also be a great source for how it may interact with your current medicine

NCCAM: NCCAM is a part of the National Institute for Health within the US Department of Health and Human Services. NCCAM was formed to sponsor and conduct research on complementary and alternative medicine, as well as, being an information center on current research for different complementary and alternative medicines. Their web site has a great deal of information including an at a glance section on herbs and dietary supplements. NCCAM Clearinghouse also has a toll free number that can be called for information and is listed below. Although they are unable to give advice or referrals, they can give you the latest research-based information about complementary and alternative medicines.

National Center for Conventional and Alternative Health

Toll Free: 1-888-644-6226

TTY: 1-866-464-3615 (for hearing impaired)

Fax: 1-866-464-3616

Monday through Friday

8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. ET

Address: *NCCAM Clearinghouse*

P.O. Box 7923

Gaithersburg, MD 20898

[E-mail NCCAM](#)

<http://nccam.nih.gov/>

Please note: NCCAM does not provide medical advice or referrals to practitioners. Decisions about medical care and treatment should be made in consultation with a health care provider, based on the condition and needs of each person.

Resources:

National Center for Conventional and Alternative Health. Retrieved from: <http://nccam.nih.gov/> (updated 2011, Dec. 8)

Mayo Clinic Staff. (2011, Nov. 17). *Herbal supplements: What to know before you buy.*

Retrieved from: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/herbal-supplements/SA00044>