HERBS

Herbs and herbal supplements have become a $1.2 billion industry in the United States, largely because many people believe that they provide inexpensive and effective relief from most maladies. In some cases, people believe the relief from herbal supplements supersedes that gained from traditional medicine. Of the $1.2 billion, only $33 million in herbs are currently sold in pharmacies. Therefore, the question that surfaces is whether or not these claims made by the industry can be substantiated by science.

Common Misconceptions

Consumers do not have to look far to find suggestions that herbal supplements may help them in a variety of ways, such as to stop feeling blue, need less sleep or eat less food. However, with all the claims on what herbs can do for people, consumers are not always clear about how herbs will affect them.

Assumptions on the effectiveness of herbs seem to go one of two opposing ways: either they are completely ineffective or completely effective and safe. The bottom line is that neither of these assumptions are true. Herbs have the potential for both beneficial and harmful effects. In many cases, scientific studies characterizing effectiveness and safety have not been done. Claims made on herbal medicine labels are not approved by the FDA or any other independent review group.

The Archives of Family Medicine (Nov/Dec 1998) recently published an article that reviewed the available data on some of the most commonly used herbs. The report found that many studies seemed to substantiate some of the claims made for herbal remedies, but it stressed that conclusive data is not yet in.

Safety Concerns

Except under the direction of a physician or qualified health care provider, herbal medicines should not be ingested by persons who have serious, pre-existing conditions (e.g., heart or liver disease, depression), young children, pregnant women or women who are nursing.

Herbal therapy should be stopped immediately if side effects such as stomach upset, headache, rash or signs of an allergic reaction occur. Herbal medicines may interact with prescription drugs. Patients should inform all of their health care providers of the herbal products they use.

Some of the herbs that have caused severe adverse reactions include chaparral, comfrey, germander (liver), Hoa (low heart rate), lobelia (hypertension), Ma Huang (which has ephedrine in it as do most "herbal fatburn" products and may cause hypertension), and yohimbe (kiddney failure).

Things To Consider

If you are interested in using herbal supplements as nutritional supplements or to treat certain conditions, it is not recommended to jump right into herbal therapies. Several basic guidelines for optimal results include:

Visit your doctor. It is important not to self-diagnose or self-medicate. Always visit your physician or health care provider and get a medical diagnosis of your condition before you begin taking herbal treatments.

Then, use herbs only on the advice and with the guidance of your physician.

Read labels. Follow the recommended dosage. Read the supplement’s label to see if it provides the herb in the “European recommended consumption levels,” which generally follows the dosage found to be most effective in clinical trials. It is usually reasonable to start with the lowest dose recommended on the label, then increase as needed. The highest recommended labeled dosage should generally not be exceeded.

Shop around. Make sure you know what you are buying. Herbs are all packaged differently. Many basic vitamin formulas now print the names of herbs on their packaging, but do not provide it in the required dosage. When in doubt, ask for assistance. Ask your physician or pharmacist for a recommended brand, or shop at a reputable store that has experienced salespeople.

For a complete report on twelve of the most commonly used herbs and recommended dosages, see the online issue of The Archives of Family Medicine at www.ama-assn.org/public/journals/fam/famhome.htm.

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# Herb Reference Guide

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<th>Herb</th>
<th>Average Daily Dose</th>
<th>Common Use</th>
<th>Precautions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Echinacea</td>
<td>6-9 ml of expressed juice</td>
<td>A supportive therapy for colds and chronic infections of the respiratory tract. An immune system stimulant.</td>
<td>May cause dermatitis in sensitive patients; allergic reactions are possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garlic</td>
<td>400-1200 mg of finely dried garlic powder; 2-5 grams of fresh bulb</td>
<td>Treatment and prevention of atherosclerosis and elevated levels of cholesterol in blood. A preventative measure for age-dependent vascular changes.</td>
<td>Large amounts may cause heartburn, flatulence, or other gastrointestinal disturbances; reported to affect menstrual cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginger</td>
<td>2-4 grams of rhizome (the root)</td>
<td>Prevention of nausea and vomiting due to motion sickness and ingestion.</td>
<td>Its safety is unknown for during early pregnancy in prevention of nausea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginkgo Biloba</td>
<td>120-240 mg standardized dry extract in 2 or 3 doses</td>
<td>Memory deficits, dementia syndromes. Improvement of distance and pain-free walking in peripheral arterial occlusive disease. Vertigo and tinnitus.</td>
<td>Contact with fruit pulp may cause a severe allergic skin reaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldenseal</td>
<td>0.5 to 1 gram of the dried root</td>
<td>To treat infections caused by bacteria, fungus, and protozoa. Despite myths, will not hide drug use in urine tests.</td>
<td>Higher doses can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and CNS stimulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kava Kava</td>
<td>100 mg of standardized extract 2 to 3 times daily</td>
<td>Conditions of nervous anxiety, stress, and restlessness. Sedative and sleep enhancement.</td>
<td>Mild gastrointestinal disturbances; not recommended during pregnancy or lactation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John's Wort</td>
<td>2-4 grams</td>
<td>To decrease mild to moderate depressive states.</td>
<td>In usual doses, appears relatively free of adverse effects.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources:
- The Rx Consultant (January 1998)