



HERBS THAT MAY HARM

About 70 per cent of people now use herbs and other supplements routinely but are not necessarily aware of the dangers that may be associated with them when mixed with health problems, drugs, general anaesthetics and surgery.

A survey showed that the most used herbs are echinacea, ginseng and ginkgo biloba, but St Johns Wort, which has some special side effects, is also commonly used.

St Johns Wort

St Johns Wort has been used medicinally since ancient Greek times to rid the body of evil spirits. Its yellow flowers traditionally gathered for the feast of St John the Baptist have given it its name. Very popular in Europe, it makes up 25 per cent of antidepressant prescriptions in Germany. It actually does work for depression when it is mild. It has some anti-viral and anti-bacterial actions, as well as anti-anxiety, anti-inflammatory and analgesic actions.

As well as working to treat mild to moderate depression, it has been somewhat helpful in helping treat the psychological and psychosomatic symptoms of menopause. It helps with Pre Menstrual Syndrome (PMS) and seasonal affective disorder. Side effects can include gastrointestinal upset, light sensitivity, rashes and agitation.

There are important interactions with St Johns Wort that must be taken note of - if you take it together with any anti-depressants, some pain medications and a supplement called 5-hydroxy tryptophan, you are at risk of getting serotonin syndrome. This is a syndrome where the brain is over stimulated and it can make you very sick indeed. In addition, St Johns Wort may reduce the action of some anti-epileptic drugs as well as tranquillisers, omeprazole, statin drugs (for cholesterol), verapamil (a heart drug), and warfarin (blood thinner). It may also interfere with the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and some cancer drugs.

Echinacea

Echinacea was used as a popular anti-infective agent and was produced originally by pharmaceutical companies until antibiotics came along. Its actions include balancing the immune system, acting as an anti-inflammatory, anti-viral and anti-fungal treatment and an antioxidant. It has been used to treat colds, chest infections, sinusitis, strep throat and influenza-like illnesses.

It is best used after the infection has occurred and if you start taking it quickly it will shorten the duration of the illness by three days. It is not safe to take Echinacea all the time because it may suppress your immune system. Echinacea has also been used for wound healing when it has been placed on the skin. It is generally well tolerated but can cause a rash in seven per cent of people. It is best not to take it if you have an autoimmune disorder like multiple sclerosis or rheumatoid arthritis.

Ginkgo Biloba

Ginkgo Biloba works in many different ways, including as an antioxidant, to dilate blood vessels, to reduce blood clotting, to help neurotransmitters in the brain, and to protect the brain from inflammation. It has been used to help treat dementia and memory impairment and it seems to work for generalised anxiety disorder. It has been useful in treating chilblains and when there are narrowed arteries in the leg, and also in a condition called Raynaud's syndrome which causes constriction of blood vessels in the hands and feet in cold weather.

It can be useful for the breast and mental symptoms of PMS, and it can help in erectile dysfunction when the cause is related to circulatory problems or if the man is on antidepressants. This medicine is well tolerated, however it must be used with caution with blood thinning medicines and anti inflammatory medicines. It also should be stopped before surgery.

Siberian Ginseng

Siberian Ginseng was used for over 2000 years in China, and Russian cosmonauts used it for alertness and energy and to aid adaptation to the stresses of life in space. This herb helps to balance and protect from stress. It also helps the immune system and athletes use it believing it helps endurance performance and power. It can help reduce the bad cholesterols, LDL and triglycerides and has generally been used for stress, nervous exhaustion and anxiety, as well as fatigue.

It is generally well tolerated but care must be taken because of some significant theoretical interactions with blood thinners, chemotherapy and diabetic medications. In addition, care should be taken when taking Siberian ginseng if you have hypertension, heart disease, diabetes and you should not take it while pregnant.

The following natural substances should be stopped one week before surgery:

Garlic, fish oil, ginger, tumeric, ginkgo biloba, vitamin E - if on more than 1000mg/day, Korean ginseng, grape seed extract, evening primrose oil.