Herbal medicine
Summary

Herbal medicine is the use of plants to treat disease and enhance general health and wellbeing.

- Herbs can act on the same biological pathways as pharmaceutical medications and should be taken with care.
- Always see your regular medical doctor (GP) about any health concerns and tell them about any complementary medicines you are taking or thinking of taking.
- Never stop taking prescribed medications in favour of herbs without first discussing it with your doctor.
- Be careful about purchasing herbal medicines over the internet. Unregulated herbal medicines, such as some traditional folk medicines, may not be manufactured to the same quality and standard as regulated medicines.

Herbal medicine has its origins in ancient cultures. It involves the medicinal use of plants to treat disease and enhance general health and wellbeing.

Some herbs have potent (powerful) ingredients and should be taken with the same level of caution as pharmaceutical medications. In fact, many pharmaceutical medications are based on man-made versions of naturally occurring compounds found in plants. For instance, the heart drug digitalis was derived from the foxglove plant.

Active ingredients and herbal medicine

Some pharmaceutical medications are based on a single active ingredient derived from a plant source. Practitioners of herbal medicine believe that an active ingredient can lose its impact or become less safe if used in isolation from the rest of the plant.

For instance, salicylic acid is found in the plant meadowsweet and is used to make aspirin. Aspirin can cause the lining of the stomach to bleed, but meadowsweet naturally contains other compounds that prevent irritation from salicylic acid.

According to herbal medicine practitioners, the effect of the whole plant is greater than its parts. Critics argue that the nature of herbal medicine makes it difficult to give a measured dose of an active ingredient.

Medicinal uses for specific herbs

Herbal medicine aims to return the body to a state of natural balance, so that it can heal itself. Different herbs act on different systems of the body. Some herbs that are commonly used in herbal medicine, and their traditional uses, include:

- **Echinacea** – to stimulate the immune system and aid the body in fighting infection. Used to treat ailments such as boils, fever and herpes
- **Dong quai (dang gui)** – used for gynaecological complaints, such as premenstrual tension, menopause symptoms and period pain. Some studies indicate that dong quai can lower blood pressure
- **Garlic** – used to reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering levels of blood fats and cholesterol (a type of blood fat). The antibiotic and antiviral properties of garlic mean that it is also used to fight colds, sinusitis and other respiratory infections
- **Ginger** – many studies have shown ginger to be useful in treating nausea, including motion sickness and morning sickness
- **Ginkgo biloba** – commonly used to treat poor blood circulation and tinnitus (ringing in the ears)
- **Ginseng** – generally used to treat weakness, for example during recovery from illness. Also used to reduce blood pressure and cholesterol levels, however overuse of ginseng has been associated with raised blood pressure
- **Hypericum** – commonly known as St John’s wort. Studies have suggested that St John’s wort is just as effective as some pharmaceutical antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression. It is also used for anxiety and insomnia. However, St John’s wort can interact with a number of prescription drugs, including the oral contraceptive pill, and stop them from working properly.

Do not self-diagnose ailments

It is very important that people do not self-diagnose any health conditions. Any medication (herbal or otherwise) should be taken under the supervision of a knowledgeable and qualified practitioner.

Special considerations for herbal medicine

Herbal preparations can be mistakenly thought to be completely safe because they are natural products. This is not correct.

Herbal medicines contain active ingredient. The active ingredients of many herbal preparations are as yet unknown. Like other prescription medications, herbal medicine should always be prescribed by a qualified and registered practitioner.

Always tell your herbal therapist:
• which over-the-counter, herbal supplements, vitamins and prescription medications you are taking
• any allergic reactions you have experienced
• if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.

Be aware herbal medicine can interact with other medications

Herbal medications and supplements may interact in harmful ways with over-the-counter or prescription medicines you are taking. Taking herbal supplements may decrease the effectiveness of other drugs you are taking or may increase the negative side effects.

If you are considering taking herbal medications it is always a good idea to talk to your doctor about possible side effects and interaction with other medications you are taking.

Purchase herbal medicine products from a reputable supplier

Not all herbal medicines that are sold are safe. Always purchase products from a reputable practitioner or pharmacist.

Be careful about purchasing herbal medicines over the internet. Unregulated herbal medicines from overseas may not be manufactured to the same quality and standard as regulated medicines. In some cases products bought over the internet have been found to have dangerous levels of lead, mercury or arsenic, which can cause serious health problems.

Complementary medicines made in Australia are subject to regulations. Consult with your pharmacist about the safety and effectiveness of the herbal medicine or supplements you are thinking of buying. If you are considering taking herbal medicine, it is recommended that you:

• Never stop taking prescribed medications without consulting your doctor.
• Always tell your doctor if you are planning to start a course of herbal medicine for your condition.
• Seek advice from your qualified health practitioner, your doctor or your pharmacist about the herbal medicine’s safety, quality and effectiveness.
• Always purchase products from a reputable practitioner or pharmacist. Be cautious about buying herbal medicines or supplements manufactured overseas.
• Take all herbal medicines strictly as prescribed and consult your health practitioner immediately if you experience any adverse reactions.

Herbal medicines may produce negative effects such as allergic reactions, rashes, asthma, headaches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea which can range from mild to severe. They can also interact negatively with other prescribed medications.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• A qualified herbal therapist or naturopath
• Your pharmacist
• Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines
• Adverse Medicine Events (AME) Line Tel. 1300 134 237 – to report a problem with your medicine

References

• Using complementary medicines, NPS Medicinewise. More Information
• Folk medicine, 2013, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA. More Information

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Complementary and alternative care

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• Safe use of complementary therapies
• Alternative systems and therapies
• Body movement and massage
• Mind body practices
• Herbs and supplements

Safe use of complementary therapies

• Complementary medicines - tell your healthcare professionals
  Tell your healthcare professionals about all medicines you take, including complementary medicines...
• Complementary medicines - the risks of buying online

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Purchasing complementary medicines online can seem attractive. Countless sites on the Internet offer a range of treatments, usually at very cheap prices. However, using products bought from online...
• **Alexander technique**
  The Alexander technique stresses that movement should be economical and needs only the minimum amount of energy and effort.

• **Bowen therapy**
  Bowen is a holistic remedial body technique that works on the soft connective tissue (fascia) of the body. Bowen therapy can be used to treat musculoskeletal or related neurological problems including.

• **Massage**
  One of the immediate benefits of massage is a feeling of deep relaxation and calm.

• **Myotherapy**
  Myotherapy is a form of physical therapy used to treat or prevent soft tissue pain and restricted joint movement.

• **Pilates and yoga - health benefits**
  Yoga and Pilates both improve muscular and postural strength.

• **Qi gong (video)**
  For centuries, Eastern cultures have practised various forms of stress reducing exercises, such as yoga and tai chi, but here's one that you may not have heard about - Qi gong.

**Mind body practices**

• **Hypnosis**
  You can't be hypnotised into doing things against your will or forced into a hypnotic state.

• **Meditation**
  Meditation techniques can promote a sense of calm and heightened awareness.

• **Qi gong (video)**
  For centuries, Eastern cultures have practised various forms of stress reducing exercises, such as yoga and tai chi, but here's one that you may not have heard about - Qi gong.

• **Tai chi - health benefits**
  People of all ages and fitness levels can practice tai chi and may gain health benefits.

**Herbs and supplements**

• **Aromatherapy**
  The different smells and chemical constituents of aromatherapy oils can produce different emotional and physiological reactions.

• **Chinese herbal medicine**
  The principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine are very different from traditional Western notions about health, illness and the workings of the body.

• **Complementary medicines - tell your healthcare professionals**
  Tell your healthcare professionals about all medicines you take, including complementary medicines.

• **Complementary medicines - the risks of buying online**
  Purchasing complementary medicines online can seem attractive. Countless sites on the Internet offer a range of treatments, usually at very cheap prices. However, using products bought from online.

• **Kambo**
  Kambo is a poison used as a traditional medicine in purging or cleansing rituals. There is a risk of serious adverse reactions, especially if kambo enters the bloodstream.

• **Tea leaves and health**
  More research is needed to discover the exact health benefits of tea drinking.

• **Vitamin and mineral supplements**
  Taking vitamin supplements is no substitute for a healthy diet.

• **Vitamins - common misconceptions**
  There is no evidence that any one vitamin can slow ageing, restore sex drive or cure infertility.
Related Information

- **Acupuncture**
  
  Acupuncture is part of traditional Chinese medicine and consists of inserting fine needles into specific points on the skin...

- **Homeopathy**
  
  Homeopathy is a form of alternative medicine that claims to stimulate and strengthen the body's ability to heal itself...

- **Kinesiology**
  
  Kinesiology uses muscle monitoring to look at imbalances that may be causing disease in the body...

- **Naturopathy**
  
  Naturopathy uses a range of treatments to stimulate your body's own healing powers...

- **Ayurveda**
  
  Ayurveda is an ancient healing system from India that uses a range of techniques to treat illness and encourage wellbeing...

Related information on other websites

- National Herbalists Association of Australia.
- Wholmed.

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