

HERBAL CURES: WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T

Experts sort through the claims so you can make the safest choices. **BY RACHEL RABKIN**

1. Who's the best person to ask for advice when buying herbs? Are health-food store clerks trustworthy?

They're hit-and-miss: Some have substantial nutritional training, while others have none, says Carol L. Roberts, M.D., president-elect of the American Holistic Medical Association. Your best bet is to talk to your doctor. If she isn't herb-savvy, ask her to recommend a reliable herbal expert or naturopathic physician, recommends Dr. Roberts. You can also find experts listed on these Web sites: holisticmedicine.org (the American Holistic Medical Association) and ahha.org (the American Holistic Health Association).

2. How can I tell whether a supplement contains the amount of herb it claims to on the label?

"You can't," says Dr. Roberts. There is little government regulation of herbal supplements, and the Food and Drug Administration is not required to put them through the same rigorous testing as drugs. However, some organizations work independently to verify ingredient amounts in supplements and offer their own seal of approval, stamping their initials on the labels of

products that pass their tests. The following are well established and reliable: ConsumerLab (CL) and the United States Pharmacopeia (USP).

3. Is there one herb I should take regularly?

Green tea. Research shows that it contains chemicals called polyphenols, which may guard against many illnesses. These include a variety of cancers (colon, esophageal and breast cancer) and heart disease, says Donald Brown, a naturopathic physician in Seattle. When consumed in moderate amounts (three to five cups a day), green tea is generally safe, but it may interact with some medications or cause diarrhea if taken in large doses. Talk to your doctor before starting a daily regimen. Remem-

ber that regular green tea contains caffeine (one cup has about 20 to 100 milligrams, depending on the brand), so if you're sensitive to it, consider drinking decaffeinated, which may offer the same health benefits.

4. Can I use herbal supplements while I'm pregnant?

Not unless you talk to your doctor first. Remember that anything you ingest is passed on to the fetus. Studies have shown that some herbs, such as echinacea (for colds), can be safe for both mother and baby. However, certain ones, including rhubarb, feverfew, ginseng, chasteberry and Saint-John's-wort, may be dangerous for pregnant women because they can alter hormonal balance and raise the risk of miscarriage.

"Natural" doesn't always equal safe. Talk to your doctor before starting any new regimen.



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5. Is the herb ma huang the same as ephedra?

Yes. Ma huang is the Chinese name for ephedra, an herbal supplement known to have dangerous side effects. In fact, a recent government report links ephedra to a higher risk of heart palpitations, tremors and insomnia, especially when taken with other stimulants, such as caffeine. The report also cited the herb as a contributing factor in two deaths, four heart attacks, nine strokes, one seizure and five psychiatric cases. Another study, published in the journal *Neurology*, found that the rate of bleeding strokes was higher among ephedra users who took more than 32 milligrams a day. The FDA has proposed that warnings be posted prominently on the thousands of commercial products containing ephedra. Some states, such as New York, are even banning retail sales of the supplement. In light of this information, steer clear of ephedra—by any name—until further notice.

6. Many companies are now replacing ephedra with herbs such as guarana. Are those safe?

It depends. These substitute ingredients are herbs that contain caffeine (others include yerbamate and kola), so they pose the same health risks as any stimulant, says Mark Blumenthal, founder and executive director of the American Botanical Council, a nonprofit herbal-medicine research and education organization in Austin. Potential dangerous side effects include a rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, heart-rhythm problems and tremors, particularly if you take large doses. For this reason, people with high blood pressure or other heart conditions should avoid these supplements. Another herb commonly found in diet aids, called bitter orange, contains the compound synephrine, which is

chemically similar to ephedrine (found in ephedra). It is considered mild-acting, but it carries risks similar to those of formulas containing ephedra.

7. I've heard that kava can harm your liver. Is this true?

Yes. Kava has been linked to severe liver damage, especially in people with conditions that affect the liver (like hepatitis) or who regularly consume other drugs that can impair the organ, such

Australia and Singapore. It's best to avoid kava until further research is done clarifying the link.

8. I read that ginseng and ginkgo biloba may not offer the benefits researchers once thought they did. Is this true?

Not necessarily—one negative study doesn't mean that the herb is conclusively ineffective. A large body of research shows that ginkgo does help slow

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as acetaminophen (found in Tylenol) and alcohol. The herb has been associated with so many adverse health effects that it's now banned in several countries, including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland,

memory loss and improve cognitive function in people suffering from dementia. A recent study also shows that ginseng may boost memory. "There's not enough research to rule out the benefits of these herbs," says Blumenthal. ■

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