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# Herbals, Natural Products and Dietary Supplements

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Herbal products are drugs

There is a common myth that herbal supplements are safe because they are plant products. **Many of our most potent drugs are also derived from plants.** While some herbal products have been used for decades, many are not studied as well as medications. Effectiveness, safe doses, and interactions are often not well studied. Supplements are not regulated by the FDA in the same way as medications.

Who makes sure supplements are safe?

In 1994, Congress passed a law that made manufacturers responsible for the safety of their own products. The Food & Drug Administration (FDA) becomes involved only after consumers report harmful side effects.

Should I tell my health care team about herbal products I take?

**Yes!** You should discuss all over the counter medicine and herbal use with your health care team. This is even more crucial if you:

- are taking any medications
- have heart disease
- have diabetes
- have liver disease
- have high blood pressure
- are having surgery

Are herbal products safe with surgery?

**No!** All herbal products need to be stopped 10 days before surgery. Some products can increase your heart rate, blood pressure, and risk of bleeding.

Can herbals interact with the medications I am taking?

**Yes!** Some herbal products can increase, decrease, or change the effect of medications you may take.



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Here are some herbal products with known interactions:

- Black cohosh – Possible liver poisoning with *Atorvastatin*, *Acetaminophen*, and *alcohol*
- Coenzyme Q 10 – May work against the action of *Coumadin (Warfarin)*
- Cranberry – May change the action of *Coumadin (Warfarin)*
- Echinacea – May increase the effects of *caffeine* and may affect how certain medications work, including *statins*, *anti-epileptics*, *antidepressants*, *blood pressure and cardiac medications*, and *anti-GERD/digestive medications*
- Evening Primrose Oil – May interfere with *anti-seizure medications* and may cause blood thinning
- Feverfew – Increases bleeding risk with *anticoagulants*
- Garlic – May affect action of *anticoagulants*, may decrease effectiveness of *protease inhibitors (HIV medication)*
- Ginger – May cause increased bleeding risk with *anticoagulants*
- Ginkgo Biloba – May interfere with *HIV medications (Efavirenz, Indinavir)* and may interfere with *anti-seizure meds, anticoagulants, and diabetes medications*
- Ginseng – May decrease the effectiveness of *Coumadin (Warfarin)* and interfere with *blood pressure and diabetic medications*
- Goldenseal – May have **serious** interactions with *Pimozide* and *Thioridazine*, may cause increased liver enzymes
- Green tea – May decrease the effectiveness of *Coumadin (Warfarin)*
- Kava – Avoid with *alcohol* or other medications which may be toxic to the liver
- Melatonin – May cause greater drowsiness with *benzodiazepines, hypnotics, antihistamines, opioids, and muscle relaxants*. May interfere with *diabetes medications and anticoagulants*.
- Saw Palmetto – May increase bleeding risk with *Coumadin (Warfarin)*, and may decrease the effectiveness of *estrogens and oral contraceptives*. Avoid if using another drug to treat BPH (such as *Finasteride*).
- St. John's Wort – May have **serious** interactions with *SSRI's, TCA's, MAO inhibitors, Nefazodone, triptans (migraine), Dextromethorphan, Coumadin (Warfarin), birth control pills, and some HIV medications*

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- Valerian – May interact with *muscle relaxants, sleep aids, anti-anxiety meds, pain meds* and *antidepressants*
  - Yohimbe – Don't combine with *MAO inhibitors*. May cause high blood pressure and rapid heartbeat.

### What do I need to know?

- Always remember to tell your healthcare team when you start or stop taking an herbal, natural product, or dietary supplement.
- The term “natural” does not mean that the product is safe.
- Follow the dosing guidelines. More is not better.
- Choose single herb products. Avoid mixtures.
- Choose only products marked with USP or Consumer Lab seals. These seals mean the products are tested for quality and content.



### What do I do if an herbal product I am taking makes me sick?

- Tell your health care team.
- Call the FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088 to report it.

### Where can I find more information about herbals?

National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements  
Bethesda, MD 20892 <http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov>

U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA)  
Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition  
5100 Paint Branch Parkway  
College Park, MD 20740  
Call 1-800-FDA-1088

[www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/default.htm)

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine  
P.O. Box 7923  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898  
1-888-644-6226  
[www.nccam.nih.gov/](http://www.nccam.nih.gov/)