

Precautions for the Use of Herbal Medicine

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Although herbal medicines are natural, and some have been in use for thousands of years, this does not necessarily mean that they are always safe and without side effects. There may be problems of quality control, standardization, and impurities among the patent herbal therapies. They can cause herb-drug interactions, induce allergies, and cause other adverse reactions. Some are toxic and some contain little or no active ingredients.

BEFORE USING HERBAL MEDICINE

- Consult your doctor about your illness. Establish the diagnosis and discuss proven treatment options.
- Tell your doctor that you may be considering using herbal preparations.
- Infants, children, and the elderly should not use herbal preparations without professional advice.
- Pregnant women, nursing mothers and those contemplating pregnancy should not use herbal preparations.
- Do not rely on individual testimonies.
- Understand that there may be risks involved.

WHEN YOU DECIDE TO USE AN HERBAL MEDICINE:

- Seek professional advice. Disclose all your underlying disease(s) and all medication(s) you may be using.
- Do not use herbal medicines with known adverse or toxic effects.
- Choose herbal patent medicines from pharmaceutical companies established for at least five years, with a United States Pharmacopeia (USP) label and/or Canada's drug identification number (DIN).
- It is best to choose products made from a single botanical species and choose extracts over powdered plant material.
- Avoid herbal medicines with exceptional claims. For example, those with words like "cure" and "no side effects."
- Choose only those medicines with a detailed listing of the contents and marked with an expiry date.
- Remember the option of a second opinion, including that of your doctor.
- Do not exceed the recommended dosage or duration of use.
- Tell your doctor that you are using herbal medicines and bring the "bottles" to show him/her.
- Always remember the possibility of an additive effect and/or herb-drug interaction.

WHEN TO STOP USING AN HERBAL MEDICINE

- When you develop a skin rash, breathing difficulties or any other allergic or adverse reactions
- When your symptoms deteriorate or do not improve, or
- When you have been taking the medicine for the recommended duration.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- Do not use for more than several weeks;
- Discontinue use three weeks prior to elective surgery (some herbal medicines can affect blood pressure or cause bleeding)
- Always tell your doctor when and why you have stopped taking an herbal medicine, especially if it is due to allergic or adverse reaction.

If nothing else, always remember to tell your doctor that you are using herbal medicines and have the information in your chart. Do not prolong use.

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