

Herbs—The “Natural” Stuff

In order to maintain my RN license in California, I have to take classes each year—called continuing education. This year I attended an excellent class on the use of herbs and other natural-type ingredients as an adjunct to conventional medicines.

In the United States, about half of us use alternative methods of treatment for various problems, at least some of the time. A third of us use herbal supplements, which are often taken with prescription medications, often without the knowledge of the prescribing doctor. Unfortunately many of these herbs react with the prescribed drugs, not always in the best manner.

Herbs are not regulated as medicine, but rather as “foods” or “dietary supplements.” Therefore they are not required to carry labels stating possible side-effects, toxicity, or contraindications. In addition, herbs are not regulated for purity or potency, they have not been subjected to clinical trials, there is no legal standard for harvesting, processing or packaging, and they don’t have to prove effectiveness or safety.

Following are some of the things I learned about commonly used herbs:

Echinacea—used as an immune booster, to prevent colds or flu.

This herb may cause an allergic reaction in anyone sensitive to pollen, and will cause a toxic reaction in anyone who is using Antabuse. It should not be taken by folks with autoimmune disease or HIV, and according to an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, is ineffective in children and causes rashes.

St. John’s Wort—used as an antidepressant and for sleep disorders.

This herb has 10 chemical components and contains photoactive compounds which, when exposed to light, produce substances which may damage the myelin (material which surrounds the nerves), resulting in neuropathy (nerve damage).

Comfrey and Chaparral—two different herbs used as anti-inflammatories.

Both of these herbs contain toxic alkaloids which can cause liver failure.



Ephedra—now banned in the United States, was used as a stimulant and for weight loss..

Ephedra is still found in some Chinese herbal medicines. It can cause high blood pressure, insomnia, cardiac arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death.

Guarana—used as a weight loss remedy

Guarana can also cause high blood pressure, and heart palpitations. This herb acts to restrict caffeine clearance, so using it with coffee can give you a real jolt.

Ginkgo Biloba—used for improvement of mental function..

Demented patients on this herb have had some improvement in mental function but there have been no studies which show any benefit for non-demented patients. This herb prolongs bleeding time, so must be used very carefully with Coumadin, aspirin or any other anticoagulant medication.

These were just a few of the more commonly used herbs discussed. It is important to remember that “natural” doesn’t mean safe (hurricanes are “natural”). If you are using herbal supplements, be sure your physician knows about it. Do some research (a great website is www.nccam.nih.gov) and most importantly, don’t play doctor!