

Herbal Remedies

An information sheet from the Kentucky Council Against Health Fraud www.kcahf.org

Overview

Herbal remedies are being marketed for the prevention and treatment of many health conditions. In general, there is little scientific support for claims being made, and possible dangers. Herbs are regulated along with dietary supplements, which means that *sellers do not have to show that they are safe and effective*. The government cannot examine every product, and usually only takes action against the most dangerous products and the most outrageous claims.

Scientific assessment

General considerations

- Some people think that herbs are safe and superior to conventional drugs because they are “natural.” This is false. *Herbs are drugs*; they can have potentially dangerous effects. They may interfere with the actions of other medications you may be taking, or the combination of the herb and the other drug may be dangerous. There are certain medical conditions in which they should not be used.
- *Dangerous herbs* which should be avoided include chaparral, comfrey, ephedra (ma huang), kava, lobelia, and yohimbe. The government has tried to get most ephedra products banned. Bitter orange (citrus aurantium), now used in place of ephedra, may also be dangerous.
- It is often difficult to determine what is in an herbal remedy. Names may include many possible plant species. The contents of active ingredients may vary considerably from batch to batch. Even though some sellers try to make *standardized* blends, this may be impossible if the active ingredients are not known.
- Some herbal remedies have been found to be contaminated with toxic chemicals, or to have had conventional drugs added. This is more likely with imported products.
- The reports of the German Commission E are generally reliable with respect to the safety of herbs, but they are not a good guide for their effectiveness.

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Specific remedies: some of these have preliminary scientific support, but in general more data are needed. Side effects are possible.

Black cohosh - used for premenstrual distress and menopausal symptoms. Some evidence in support, but its usefulness has still not been established.

Echinacea - marketed to enhance the immune system. Five controlled trials (1998-2004) found no benefit.

Feverfew - to treat migraine, fevers, other. Some supportive data for migraine effects, but not conclusive.

Ginger - some evidence that it is useful for nausea of gastrointestinal origin; more conclusive studies are needed.

Ginkgo biloba - widely used in Europe for improvement of circulation, mental function, other. Some studies support use in Alzheimer's, where it *slightly* slowed progression of dementia. Recent studies found no effect on memory.

Ginseng - promoted for general enhancement of "energy" and well-being. However, there is no good evidence that it is useful.

St. John's wort - appears to be better than placebo for *short-term* treatment of *mild* depression; whether it is as good as the best drugs, and whether it works in the long-term or for more severe depression, has not been shown. *Can cause other drugs to be less effective.*

Saw palmetto - some evidence for relief of symptoms of benign prostate conditions, but this is controversial. Large placebo effects are seen in some trials, which could explain the apparent benefits of saw palmetto.

Silymarin (milk thistle extract) - suggested to be useful for liver problems, but good evidence is not yet available.

Valerian - two controlled studies suggest that it might be useful in promoting sleep, but overall the evidence is still inconclusive.

For further information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/herbs.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/paraherbalism.html>

Recommendations

We recommend the use of conventional medicines, whose benefits, side effects, and doses are known, rather than herbs. If you do use herbs, remember that they are drugs; inform your health care providers of any herbal remedies that you are taking. Do not use if you are pregnant or breast feeding, since their safety in these situations has not been shown. Seek out reliable scientific assessments (such as from government or medical web sites) of the safety and effectiveness of herbal remedies, rather than information from people who are trying to sell you a product.

Recommendations of KCAHF are based on our assessments of the scientific literature concerning unconventional approaches to health care. For specific recommendations concerning your medical condition, consult your physician.

For further information, contact KCAHF, 7605 Devondale Ct., Louisville, KY 40222 or send e-mail to: tjwheeler@louisville.edu