



ASK DR. BOB . . .

with Dr. Bob Frank

SNAKE OIL, MAGIC POTIONS, AND HERBAL MEDICINE

Herbal supplements and medications are an extremely popular topic at the present time. No wonder, since it is estimated that 80% of the world's population use plants as their primary source of medicines, and surveys in this country have shown that anywhere from 25 up to 50% of people use supplements on an intermittent to regular basis. It is also a big time financial enterprise, since in 1998 \$6.5 billion was spent in the USA on natural products. Obviously, that figure is much higher today, since the use of such products continues to increase.

The whole arena of herbal medicine is much too vast to sufficiently cover in a simple article. However, I will try to discuss briefly a few of the more commonly used herbs. First, let us define an herbal supplement as any plant or plant part that is primarily used for medicinal purposes. It is also important to note that the production and distribution of these herbs occurs in an unregulated market. While prescription and over-the-counter drugs must be proven safe and effective and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), herbal products are considered as dietary supplements. Based

upon the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, these products can be sold and labeled with statements describing their professed affects, but they do not have to have proof that they work. They cannot make health or therapeutic claims on labels.

In the professional literature of Europe and Asia, there are many articles regarding efficacy and safety, but there are few studies in the English language. More recently, there has been a lot of research that is focusing on identifying and isolating the active ingredients of these herbal products. However, many herbalists consider the power of a plant to lie in all of its ingredients and not just simply an isolated chemical compound within that plant. Since many of the ingredients of herbs are still unknown, it is theoretically conceivable that a whole plant can sometimes be more effective and possibly have fewer side effects than its individual components. And remember, natural does not mean safe.

There have been numerous instances of severe and even fatal reactions occurring with use of herbal products. It is also believed that most adverse effects associated with herbal products are unreported. A good example regarding this lies in the use of Ma Huang, which contains the active ingredient ephedra. This can be toxic to the liver and central nervous system. Ephedra is related to ephedrine, and there have been numerous reports of serious elevations of blood pressure, seizures, heart rhythm disturbances, heart attack, stroke, and even death with the use of this medicine. In fact, the FDA has now asked all companies that produce a product that contains ephedrine to voluntarily remove this from the market.

The most widely used herbal product in Europe is Ginkgo biloba, which is produced from the Ginkgo tree. It is believed to have antioxidant, vascular protective, and neuro-protective properties. It has been used in conditions of poor cerebral and peripher-

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al circulation, dementia, and other types of mental symptoms such as problems with memory, confusion, dizziness, and depressed mood. Some herbal medicines have been formally studied in small trials which have been published in the English language. This includes an article about Gingko in the Journal of the American Medical Association. In individuals with dementia, this small study did find significant improvement in several rating scales of severity, but not in the more objective rating scales.

Probably the most popular herb used in this country is that of Echinacea, also known as purple coneflower. It is promoted to increase our immunity to various illnesses and diseases. It has been used to treat the flu and cold and to prevent respiratory infections. A study published in 1992 did not confirm such efficacy.

Ginger root has also been promoted as a good antidote for seasickness. In a 1982 study published in the Lancet, it did improve the ability of men and women in the Naval Academy to withstand being placed in a rotating chair that mimicked significant ship movements. It has also been used for the nausea and emesis of pregnancy.

Another popular product is Saw Palmetto. It is promoted as being anti-androgenic, anti-estrogenic, and anti-inflammatory. It is used for benign prostatic hypertrophy, and has been shown to decrease the size of the prostate. In several published studies, Saw Palmetto was as effective as finasteride (a prescription medication used for BPH symptoms) in men with mild to moderate symptoms of prostatic hypertrophy. It also tends to be well tolerated. There has been some concern that it may falsely lower PSA levels, making the detection of prostate cancer more difficult.

The last herb that I will mention is that of St. John's

Wort. It is actually licensed for use in Germany for depression and anxiety, and is the most widely prescribed antidepressant in this country. It has been shown in numerous studies to be as effective as standard antidepressants in mild depression. There are several active ingredients that have been isolated from St. John's Wort that have been shown to have specific biochemical reactions within our brain. These chemical reactions are similar to the reactions caused by widely used prescription medications.

Since the belief in, and usage of, such herbal products is so widespread, it is not likely that a simple admonition from a doctor or scientist will stop their widespread use. However, I would caution everyone that they can have potentially serious side effects, and may also have significant interactions with other prescription medications that are being taken. For this reason, you should always make your physician aware of what type of herbal products you are taking and also discuss with your doctor any side effects that you feel you may be having. There is also very little information about their use in children and pregnant women, and they should not be used by these people. Their use should be immediately stopped at the first sign of any possible allergic reaction. You should also use supplements that are made from a reliable source, since there can be contamination and varying levels of active ingredients in poorly prepared products by unscrupulous companies. Lastly, use your common sense and interpret all the extravagant claims in light of current scientific evidence. Remember, if it's too good to be true, it probably isn't.

For additional information on herbal medicines and the effect they have on underwriting, contact Dr. Bob Frank, ext. 2641.