

Using Complementary Medicines

Herbs, Vitamins, Minerals and Natural Products

What Are Complementary Medicines?

These include herbs, vitamins, minerals and other substances that occur “naturally.” They are also called dietary supplements or natural products. Examples include St. John’s wort, ginseng, ginkgo biloba, SAM-e or echinacea. They may be used alone or with a medicine prescribed by your doctor.

What Facts Do You Need to Know?

- Complementary medicines may interact with prescription medicines. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about which natural products you want to take and what you can expect from them. Some prescription and complementary medicines interfere with each other. This may cause side effects. Some natural products may irritate some medical conditions.

Your doctor or pharmacist can tell you about known interactions before you take any natural product.

- Complementary medicines don’t have the same federal regulation as prescribed medicines. Complementary medicines may seem safe because they come from “natural” products such as plants; however, like prescription medicines, they are not “natural” to your body.
- Make sure the producer of a natural product makes a quality product that is not tainted. Natural products do not need to be tested. You need to make sure you are buying a quality product. Read the label carefully.

You need to know where the product comes from, the amount of the active ingredient and how safe it is.

- Look for a standard extract. This means you are getting a consistent product.
- Try to find out if the maker tests for heavy metals, pesticides, fungi or mold, bacteria or parasites.

How Can You Protect Yourself?

- Ask the following questions when you think about taking a natural product:
 - What are the product’s pros and cons?
 - What are the risks and possible side effects?
 - What effects or results have other people had from this product?
 - How long does it take to see results?
- Buy natural products from a reliable source. A nationally known food and drug company is likely to use tight quality controls.
- Read the product’s label. It should list:
 - the exact species and amount of herb per dose
 - precautions
 - name and address of maker
 - batch and lot number
 - expiration dates
 - a guarantee the product was tested to be free of contaminants

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— a guarantee the product is an accurate dose.

Call the product's maker if the product doesn't have this information. If the company tests its products you should be able to get this information.

- You may want to keep a journal to write any positive and negative effects from the natural products.
- Avoid natural products from undeveloped countries. They may be made with heavy metals (such as lead or mercury). Some products may even have unlisted prescription medicines.
- Do not use natural products in place of professional medical advice. Talk with your doctor about which products are right for you.
- You may have a reaction to a natural product. It may also react with a prescription medicine or make your medical condition worse. Tell your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking any natural products or dietary supplements.
- Do not stop taking prescribed medicines unless your doctor says it's OK.