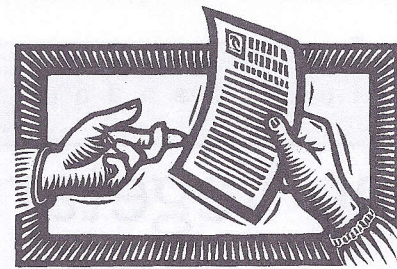


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**H**erbal products are more popular than ever before. Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe herbs are entirely harmless. In fact, they contain substances that can dramatically affect the mind and body. While many herbs are safe and effective when used properly, it's important to be aware of potential side effects, harmful interactions with drugs and other health dangers. Consumers should be cautious when using any herb, whether it comes in the form of tablets, capsules, bulk herbs, teas, tinctures, drinks, bars or enhanced foods.

Nutrition consultant Ellen Coleman, MA, MPH, RD, offers the following tips for using herbs safely:

**1. Educate Yourself.** The herbal supplement marketplace is largely self-regulated. In the United States, herbs are not subject to any legal standards for processing or harvesting. Contents and potency can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer and, in some cases, may not even be accurately listed on the label. Seek independent sources of information on herbal supplements. Don't rely only on product labels.

**2. More Is Not Better.** When trying an herb, start with small doses. Don't consume an herb for a prolonged period of time, and avoid taking large quantities of any single herb.

**3. Read Labels Carefully.** Use only products that clearly identify their contents and list contraindications to use. Carefully take note of any warnings on the packages or labels.

**4. Try One at a Time.** Try to stick to single-herb products, rather than combination products. In combination products, a single herb's benefits or side effects may be hard to determine.

**5. Always Inform Your Health Care Provider.** Check with a physician before taking an herb, to make sure it is safe and doesn't interact with any other dietary supplements or any over-the-counter or prescription medications you are using. This is especially important for pregnant or nursing women and individuals with chronic or serious health problems.

**6. Monitor Your Responses.** Stay alert to how your body responds, both positively and negatively, to herb use. If a problem arises, immediately discontinue use and call your doctor.

**7. Choose Manufacturers Carefully.** To identify reputable manufacturers, ask these questions: Does the company offer a toll-free customer service telephone number? Can it be reached? Has the company been in business for an estab-

lished period of time—at least 15 years? Does the company conduct scientific product research and publish the results of the studies?

**8. Stay Informed on Herbs to Avoid.** For example, ephedra (or ma huang) contains the central nervous system stimulant ephedrine, which is structurally similar to amphetamines and increases heart rate and blood pressure. The FDA recommends that ephedrine-containing products carry a warning that taking more than the recommended dose may cause heart attack, stroke, seizure or death. Another herb, guarana, has a high caffeine content that increases serum levels of the hormone epinephrine; can cause nausea, muscle tremors, heart palpitations and headache; and may increase the adverse effects of any products you're taking that contain ephedrine. The herb yohimbine increases serum levels of norepinephrine and can cause nervous excitation, tremor, anxiety, increased blood pressure, rapid heart beat, nausea and vomiting.

**9. Even Effective Herbs Need to Be Used With Caution.** Many herbs are useful and safe, but only when used properly. For example, echinacea may increase resistance to upper-respiratory infections. However, echinacea's benefits may be lost with continued use and taking it for longer than eight consecutive weeks is not recommended. People with a progressive systemic disease (such as tuberculosis) or an autoimmune disease (such as multiple sclerosis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or inflammatory bowel disease) should avoid echinacea.

**10. Have Realistic Expectations.** Keep in mind that a great deal of research is still needed to assess the effectiveness and safety of many herbs. Herbs may interact with the body, foods, drugs and other herbs in ways that have not yet been determined. Responsiveness can also vary among individuals. The best strategy is to proceed with caution, seek as much information as possible and consult with health care professionals. Many people have benefited greatly from herbs. You, too, can add them to your healthy lifestyle program, as long as you use them wisely.

10 Tips  
 for  
 Safe Herb  
 Usage

