



The Center for Integrative Medicine

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Herbs/Supplements

General Guidelines for Western Herbal and Other Supplement Medications*

If you are interested in taking a supplement medication:

- ☞ Unlike other over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medications, the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate the production and sale of supplements. Products called “supplements” (including herbs) do not need to show proof of safety or effectiveness before being sold.
- ☞ *Natural* products have no guarantee of being *safe*. Herbs used for health purposes have effects on the body just like prescription drugs. Both should be used with care. There are some supplements that are truly unlike any prescription or OTC medicines. These products are worth taking a look at if you have symptoms they may help.

If you decide to use a supplement medication:

- ☞ Please inform your physician(s) and health care providers.
- ☞ Consider that not all health problems can be safely self-diagnosed. For example, you may think you have depression when in fact you may have a thyroid problem. In that instance taking an herb for depression wouldn't be effective. Generally, if there are OTC products available for the condition you are trying to treat (such as colds or pain) it means that the FDA thinks that condition is safely self-diagnosed and self-treated. Ask your physician to confirm the diagnosis of other problems first.
- ☞ Look for a product that has been standardized to the United States Pharmacopoeia (USP) guidelines. Such products have the designation “NF”, for “natural formulary”, on their label. TCFIM can recommend a reputable product.
- ☞ Be objective about the herb's effects. Consider keeping a symptom diary to track your symptoms before and after taking the herb. Try to take only one single-ingredient product at a time to better determine each herb's effects.
- ☞ Stop taking the product if you notice side effects, and tell your physician.
- ☞ Be extremely cautious about using herbs when you have a chronic illness or are taking other OTC or prescription medications. Herbal products may interfere with the disease or with the other medications.
- ☞ Using the Internet as a sole resource for information on herbs is not recommended. While there are some sites that offer reliable information, many are more interested in your money than in your health.

If you are interested in learning more about supplements:

The Center for Integrative Medicine has a Physician, PharmD/Pharmacist, and Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners available for herbal supplement or Chinese herbal consultations. Please call the Wellness Concierge at The Center for Integrative Medicine, University of Colorado Hospital, 720-848-1090, Monday - Friday, 8:00a.m. - 5:00p.m. to schedule an appointment.

**Note that this handout is aimed at helping you decide how to responsibly use the products that you can purchase in a store (“Western Herbs”); questions about the use of Traditional Chinese Medicinal herbs are best answered by a Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor, who would prescribe them.*

