

Naturopathic Medicine is a primary health care system that uses natural therapies to support and stimulate the body's innate ability to heal itself.

This Naturopathic Guide is designed to provide an understanding of the benefits, uses, safety and precautions of Botanical Medicines on their own and when used with prescription medicines and over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

General Overview

Botanical Medicine (botanicals) refers to plants and plant substances. They have been used extensively throughout the world for thousands of years. Botanicals have significant therapeutic effect and benefit for most medical conditions and are often used as a first line treatment option.

Botanicals are highly effective and safe in the right dosage and when used correctly with other botanicals and forms of treatments, including, but not limited to, prescription medications. Botanicals can be prepared and used in many forms – injectable extracts, tinctures (liquid), capsules, poultices, teas and included in the diet.

There are over 2,000 known botanicals. Each one has its own unique properties and therapeutic effects. Like all substances, the safety and efficacy of botanicals is based on their proper use. Botanicals may often be used concurrently with prescription medications to augment or support the effect and to aid in the healing process.

Drug-botanical interactions are a potential risk, in part due to side effects of drugs and how drugs alter the physiology of the body. Side effects of drugs and drug-botanical interactions may also be increased when there are nutrient deficiencies.

Information on botanical medicines

Botanicals are used for numerous purposes, such as:

- To prevent and treat serious illness
- To decrease the use of prescription medications
- To promote good health
- To improve energy
- To improve memory
- To treat acute and chronic conditions,
- To reduce anxiety
- To ease depression
- To enhance immunity

How common is the use of botanical medicines in Canada?

According to surveys completed from 2000 – 2006 the use of botanicals is steadily increasing with the following statistics often reported:

- Over 1/3 of people use botanicals daily.
- Almost ¾ have used botanicals within the last year.
- About 1/3 of people use botanicals instead of prescription medications
- About ½ report using botanicals instead of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs.
- About 1/3 use botanicals with prescription medication and with over-the-counter (OTC) drugs.

General Questions and Answers

Q: What training is required to ensure the safe and appropriate use of botanicals?

A: The study of botanicals is referred to as botanical medicine. Pharmacognosy is the study of the botanical's constituents and how they affect physiology, biochemistry and pathology.

Naturopathic Doctors are the only licensed health professionals in Canada trained, educated and who have passed board exams in botanical medicine, pharmacognosy, and pharmacology, and have the ability to diagnose, treat, and recognize specific botanical and drug interactions.

When choosing botanicals as a treatment option ensure that you are working with a Naturopathic Doctor or another health professional that has the appropriate training.

Q: Can botanicals be used to treat acute and chronic health concerns?

A: When addressing acute and chronic health concerns, Naturopathic Doctors work with individuals to identify and address all the root cause and lifestyle factors that are contributing or affecting health. It is important to address the contributing factors that are impacting health and then to support the body in the gentlest way that will restore or improve health. Botanicals are very effective as part of an overall treatment plan to address many/most all types of health concerns.

Q: Why is there a concern about drug interactions?

A: The number of people taking multiple prescription medications is increasing. The risk of drug-drug interactions is well documented. When an individual takes multiple drugs or medications at the same time, when different substances are being used to treat the same disease, and when an individual has multiple health concerns there is always the risk of interactions.

The latest information on prescription medications

- Currently there are over 22,000 prescription medications available in Canada.
- Over 55% of women and 40% of men over the age of 65 are on more than 5 drugs
- 10% of people over the age of 65 are on more than 10 drugs.
- At least 76% of people in the mid-life and older age groups are taking at least one drug.
- Many of the drug-drug interactions have yet to be determined.

Q: How do drug-botanical interactions happen?

A: People take drugs and botanicals to address specific health concerns. They are helpful because they shift physiological processes in the body to improve health and/or decrease symptoms. Drug-botanical interactions occur when there is a change in the *pharmacokinetics*, relating to how the drug or botanical is absorbed, distributed, metabolized or eliminated; or when there is a change to the *pharmacodynamics*, which relates to the combined affect of the drug and the botanical.

Q: Are all drug-botanical interactions bad?

A: No. Interactions can be either good or bad and depend on the knowledge of the practitioner prescribing the botanicals and the drugs. Many times the use of drugs and botanicals concurrently is intentional and beneficial botanicals may be introduced to a treatment regimen to decrease the dosage or side effects of prescription medications. When using botanicals and drugs concurrently it is important that the practitioner responsible for deciding on what a person takes is properly trained in drugs and botanicals and how they interact for example, Naturopathic Doctors.

Q: What health conditions cause the greatest risk of interactions?

A: Botanicals are a safe option and treatment choice for most health conditions. Interactions often occur when a patient is taking more than one form of treatment for the same health condition. Health concerns that involve taking blood thinners, blood pressure medications, blood sugar medications, or medications for chronic infections are the ones that need to be the most closely monitored.

If you are taking any prescription medication(s) consult a Naturopathic Doctor, Medical Doctor or pharmacist before taking any botanicals, OTCs, natural health products or before making any drastic changes to your diet, especially if any of the factors listed below relate to you.

- Chronic illness or poor health status.
- More than three medications.
- High dosages of a medication or medications that have a narrow therapeutic window.
- Impaired kidney or liver function.

Q: What are the most common reported drug-botanical interactions?

A: There is minimal research or case reports that indicate drug-botanical interactions. There are also a number of drug-botanical interactions that have been reported or theorized that have turned out to be inaccurate in practice.

The most common reported drug-botanical interactions include:

- **Warfarin or any anti-clotting drug** interacts with many other drugs, botanicals, natural health products and some foods.

- **St. John's Wort** is a common botanical that is safely used by many people. There is some concern of interaction if you are concurrently taking anti-clotting drugs, oral contraceptives, antidepressants, anti-seizure drugs, HIV drugs, antiarrhythmics, antimalarials or immune-suppressants.
- **Ginkgo biloba** is an effective botanical for enhancing peripheral blood circulation. Therefore, it should be used with caution if you are taking anti-clotting drugs like warfarin, ASA, heparin, and NSAIDs.
- **Garlic** is generally safe, but care needs to be taken with warfarin, cholesterol lowering drugs, insulin, indomethacin, and anti-clotting drugs. Garlic is beneficial in that it may prevent liver toxicity of ASA, and enhance insulin and cholesterol lowering effects.
- **Ginseng** interacts with monoamine oxidase inhibitors, antibiotics, insulin, and warfarin.

Naturopathic Considerations for the use of Botanicals

- If you are faced with health concerns work with a Naturopathic Doctor to determine if botanicals are an appropriate treatment option, and if so, which ones.
- Recognize that botanicals are a safe and effective treatment when prescribed by a properly trained practitioner.
- Never self prescribe any botanical if you are treating a serious health condition or taking a drug with a higher degree of toxicity.
- Never self prescribe any botanical if you have an undiagnosed health concern or a chronic illness.

- If you are taking prescription medication for a health concern and you are taking botanicals to address the same health concern ensure that your health status is monitored, as you may need to alter the dosage of your prescription medication.
- Avoid taking any botanicals continuously for more than 4 months unless a Naturopathic Doctor or other trained professional has prescribed them for long-term use

Notify your Naturopathic Doctor, Medical Doctor or other health practitioner:

- Of ALL the prescription medication, botanicals or other natural health products that you are taking.
- Of any changes, increases, decreases or alterations to your prescription medication, botanicals or other natural health products.
- If you have any adverse reaction, worsening of your symptoms, or if you have any new signs or symptoms that started after taking or changing any prescription medication or botanicals.

Other Recommendations:

- Avoid taking your prescription medications or botanicals with juice, unless your health care provider has informed you that it is okay. Specific juices may affect the ability of the liver to properly handle specific drugs and botanicals.
- Ensure that you read the labels and package inserts for all your prescription medication and botanicals.
- Only take prescription medications or botanicals that clearly indicate the dosage of each active ingredients or constituent.

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References to be supplied upon request