

Taking Herbal Medicines as Part of Your Cancer Care



Information for patients having cancer treatment

Read this information to learn more about:

- What herbal medicine is
- What you need to know about taking herbal medicine during chemotherapy or immunotherapy
- Where to get more information



What is herbal medicine?

Herbal medicine has been used around the world for thousands of years. It is used to treat many types of illnesses.

Herbal medicine refers to chemicals found in plants. It is a specific type of natural medicine different from vitamins, minerals and homeopathy.

Many people with cancer choose to take herbal medicines. They usually take them while having their regular cancer treatment.

Why do people with cancer use herbal medicine?

There are many reasons for using herbal medicine:

- to treat the side effects of cancer treatment including tiredness and nausea
- to kill cancer cells
- to boost the immune system (the body's natural defence against illness)
- to improve quality of life and well-being
- to relieve symptoms when all other therapies have failed

Can I use herbal medicines during chemotherapy or immunotherapy?

Herbal medicines can stop chemotherapy or immunotherapy from working properly. This is called a **drug interaction**. Some herbal medicines make it harder to kill cancer cells.

For example, when a person takes St. John's Wort with certain chemotherapy or immunotherapy, only half of the usual amount of chemotherapy or immunotherapy may be absorbed by the body. This means that the effect of chemotherapy or immunotherapy is decreased. Other herbal medicines can make side effects worse.

Tell your nurse, doctor, or pharmacist about your herbal medicines. They can tell you if your herbal medicines will interfere with chemotherapy or immunotherapy.

Are herbal medicines safe to use?

Most people think that herbal medicines are safe because they are natural. Like any medicine, they can have mild or serious side effects.

Are herbal medicines effective at treating cancer?

Before a medicine or medical treatment is approved for use in people, scientific studies must prove they are safe and effective. Surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy and immunotherapy have all been proven to kill cancer cells, extend life, or improve the quality of life for people with cancer.

However, most herbal medicines have not been proven by good scientific studies. We need more studies on herbal medicines to know if they are safe to use with chemotherapy or immunotherapy.

Why are health care providers worried about herbal medicines?

Health care providers are often worried about herbal medicines because:

- The proper dose of the herb may not be known.
- The herb may have drug interactions with chemotherapy or immunotherapy.
- The herb may not be safe.
- The herb may not be effective in treating cancer.
- The herb may stop chemotherapy, immunotherapy or radiation from working properly.
- The herb may have other unsafe substances because herbs do not go through the testing that other medicine does.

Tell your health care team about any herbal medicines you take, or plan to take. We can work together to make sure that your cancer treatment is right for you.

Where can I find more information?

It is important to get your information from sources you can trust. This helps you make good decisions about your cancer treatment.

Sources you can trust usually come from the hospital, government health agencies (such as Health Canada) or your health care team.

To learn more, check these trusted websites:

- Memorial Sloan Kettering
<https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine>
- BC Cancer Agency
www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/complementary-alternative-therapies
- Natural Medicines (available through UHN virtual library)
<https://naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com>
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health
<https://nccih.nih.gov>



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