

# Using Herbal and Other Natural Health Products Before and After Transplant



## Organ transplant patient information

Read this brochure to learn why the UHN Multi-Organ Transplant Program recommends that you do not use herbal and natural health products after transplant and while on the waiting list for transplant.



Natural health products are substances found in nature. There are many types of natural health products that can be found in Canadian stores such as:

- Herbal remedies
- Homeopathic medicine
- Traditional medicine (such as Chinese medicine or Aboriginal medicine)
- Probiotics
- Vitamins and minerals
- Amino acids and essential fatty acids

There is very little reliable information on the health benefits of herbal and other natural health products.

For people waiting for organ transplant or people who have had an organ transplant, the use of some herbal and natural health products may cause serious health problems including **infection** and **rejection** of your transplanted organ.

**For your safety, the UHN Multi-Organ Transplant Program recommends that you do NOT use herbal and natural health products after transplant and while on the waiting list for transplant.**

## **Frequently asked questions about using herbal and natural health products before or after transplant**

### **Can I use herbal medications or natural health products safely before transplant?**

If you are on the transplant waiting list, do not use any herbal and natural health products because we don't know for sure when your transplant surgery will happen.

It may be dangerous for you to have natural health products in your body close to the time of surgery. This is because many natural products can thin the blood and increase the risk of bleeding. They can also affect how the anesthesia works and how your wound heals.

If you will be receiving a transplant from a living donor, it is important to stop taking any herbal and natural health products at least 2 weeks before your surgery date.

### **Can I use herbal medications or natural health products safely after my transplant?**

The UHN Multi-Organ Transplant Program recommends that you do not take herbal medications and natural health products after a transplant because:

- There is very little good information about whether herbal medications or natural health products help people after a transplant.
- Herbs and other natural health products may interact with your anti-rejection medications and other drugs. This can cause you harmful side effects such as bleeding, infection, kidney damage or worsening of your other medical conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes.
- Herbs and other natural health products can affect how well your transplant medications work and cause rejection of your transplanted organ.
- There are issues with the quality of many natural health products and many reports of contamination. There may be 'hidden' ingredients that are not listed on the label, which could be harmful.

## **How do herbs and other natural products interact with my transplant medications?**

Herbs and other natural health products may affect the way anti-rejection medications break down in your body. If you use these products, they can increase your chance of organ rejection by lowering the level of anti-rejection medications in your blood. They can also increase your chance of harmful side effects such as infection, damage to the kidneys, tremor, high blood pressure or stomach problems.

Some of these products may actually boost your immune system. This is **not** a good thing after transplant because it can increase your chance of organ rejection.

## **If herbal medications and supplements are natural, why aren't they safe?**

When a product says 'natural', this does not mean that it's safe, natural to the body, or good for you. Even though herbs come from plants, they can affect how other drugs work in the body. Some products may also interact with or boost your immune system. This may increase the chance that your body rejects the transplanted organ.

## **Are there any herbal or natural health products that are OK to take?**

Some patients may need vitamin or mineral supplements after transplant. This will be assessed by your transplant team. These vitamin and mineral supplements are safe to use as long as your transplant team prescribes or approves them. Make sure you follow the dosing recommendations from your doctor or transplant team.

## **Can I drink herbal tea?**

Most herbal teas that you find at the supermarket use herbal flavouring or have very small amounts of the actual herb. These are fine to use in moderation.

Do not use teas made from steeping or boiling plant parts (such as flowers, leaves, seeds or roots) in water. We cannot be certain of what is in these plant parts and there is no way to make sure that using these types of teas is safe.

### **Can I cook with herbs, spices or vinegars?**

It is safe for you to cook with herbs, spices and vinegars in the usual amounts. If you use large amounts of herbs, spices or vinegars for a long time, this may increase your chance of side effects or interactions with your other medications.

### **Can I take probiotics?**

Do not take probiotic pills, powders or other supplements with probiotics in them. These can cause you to have a serious infection. They could also affect your immune system and increase your chance of organ rejection.

Probiotics found in yogurt or cheese are fine when eaten in moderation (for example, 2 or 3 servings a day).



**If you have any more questions about using herbal and natural health products before or after transplant, please speak with your transplant team.**



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