**Getting to the Root of Herbal Medicines**

2000 BC – Here, eat this root.

1000 AD – That root is heathen. Here, say this prayer.

1850 AD – That prayer is superstition. Here, drink this potion.

1940 AD – That potion is snake oil. Here, swallow this pill.

1985 AD – That pill is ineffective. Here, take this antibiotic.

2000 AD – That antibiotic doesn’t work anymore. Here eat this root.

Author unknown

We have come full circle in what we consider to be effective prevention and treatment of diseases. The public is certainly examining its “roots” and increasing its demand for natural alternatives to manufactured drugs. An estimated 38 million people in the United States use herbal and dietary supplements. Even more Europeans rely on herbal medicines for prevention and treatment of illness. In Germany, 65 % of the general public used herbal remedies in 1997. The majority of users of herbal remedies are not rejecting main-stream medical care, though many are disillusioned with the high cost of pharmaceuticals and the lack of access to personalized medical care. Today’s informed health care consumers want greater control over their health care choices and see “natural” products as a safe alternative or complement to prescription medications. The question remains as to whether herbal treatments and other complementary and alternative therapies are safe or even effective. Consumers need to consider what they are taking, what they are taking it for, and the possibility of side effects and interactions when they are contemplating the use of an herbal remedy.

Authoritative opinions on the safety and efficacy of alternative therapies appear to vary according to which side of the Atlantic Ocean that they are coming from. In the United States, herbal medicinals are considered dietary supplements and therefore outside of the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Administration. At the same time, American medical literature is rife with warnings about the lack of evidence of effectiveness of herb, and the reliability of their risk-benefit assessments. Herbal remedies are rarely included in a general practitioner’s repertoire of treatments and few physicians feel comfortable discussing complementary and alternative medicine with their patients.

In Europe, on the other hand, the use of herbs is strongly integrated with conventional medicine. Many medical and pharmacy schools include the use of herbs in their curricula, resulting in mainstream acceptance of their use. Herbal remedies are sold in pharmacies as licensed non-prescription or prescription medicines and must be registered according to quality, safety and efficacy. While American researchers are isolating active ingredients and testing them for their safety and effectiveness, in Europe efficacy is considered to be co-determined by many plant constituents and a product is considered safe if it has been traditionally used without demonstrated harm. With such a dichotomy of thought on the use of these products it is even more imperative that consumers be proactive about their own health and become well informed regarding the products that they choose to use.

Because they are considered to be “natural” products and therefore somehow “safe”, many people think that herbs can be used freely without consideration of their possible effects and side effects. Before deciding to use an herbal remedy, however, it is important to understand its desired effects, possible side effects, and possible interaction with other substances. The most commonly used herbs have been well researched and information is publicized and readily available. Some of the more common herbs include: Echinacea, Ginkgo, St John’s Wort, Ginseng, Black Cohosh, Valerian, Kava Kava,and Saw Palmetto.

Echinacea, or purple cone flower, has been used for centuries to stimulate the immune system and to prevent and treat upper respiratory infections and the common cold. Clinical studies support claims of the effectiveness of this herb in treating colds, though the evidence is less strong for its claims of prevention. Echinacea is well tolerated by most people. Stomach upset and rash are the only reported side effects. Allergic reactions to Echinacea are not uncommon, particularly in people who have asthma or are allergic to ragweed, chrysanthemums, marigolds and daisies.

The Ginkgo tree is one of the oldest types of trees in the world and Ginkgo has been used in Chinese medicine for centuries. Today Ginkgo is used mainly to improve memory, prevent or treat Alzheimer’s disease, and to treat leg pain caused by narrowing of the arteries. Some research does support Ginkgo’s use as a memory enhancer, but there has been no evidence of its effectiveness in preventing or treating memory loss as a result of Alzheimer’s disease or other dementias. Ginkgo has been shown to increase risk of bleeding, so should not be used by anyone taking an anticoagulant such as warfarin, or who is contemplating a surgical or dental procedure. The side effects of Gingko include headache, stomach upset, diarrhea, and dizziness.

Research evidence supports the use of St. John’s Wort for the treatment of mild to moderate depression, anxiety and sleep disorders. Side effects of St. John’s wort include anxiety, dry mouth, dizziness, fatigue, headache, and gastrointestinal symptoms. It also interacts with many medications (antidepressants, birth control pills, cyclosporine, digoxin, indinavir, some cancer drugs, seizure control drugs, warfarin and other anticoagulants) in a way that can interfere with their intended use.

Some of the uses of Ginseng include increased sense of well-being, treating menopausal symptoms, lowering blood pressure and controlling blood glucose. There is scientific evidence that supports the use of Ginseng in lowering blood glucose and in its beneficial effects on the immune system. It is well tolerated by most people but should be used with caution in combination with other medicines or herbs that lower blood glucose levels.

Black Cohosh is a well known remedy for menopausal symptoms as well as menstrual irregularities and premenstrual symdrome, but science to date does not support its effectiveness. Few side effects have been reported with Black Cohosh and the risk of interactions with other drugs seems to be small. Because there is some concern that this herb may cause inflammation of the liver, anyone using it should be aware of symptoms of liver problems such as abdominal pain, dark colored urine, or jaundice.

Valerian has been used since the time of ancient Greece and Rome as a remedy for sleep disorders and anxiety. There is some research to support its helpfulness with insomnia, but little has been done to determine if it is effective for anxiety or other conditions such as depression. Valerian has only mild side effects of headache, dizziness and upset stomach and there is little evidence that it interacts with other medicines or herbs.

A native plant of the South Pacific, Kava is used primarily for anxiety, insomnia and menopausal symptoms. Scientific evidence supports its use for the treatment of anxiety but there is no research that confirms its other claims. Kava has been linked to liver toxicity and dystonia, or abnormal muscle spasms. It is also believed to interact with many drugs, particularly those used for Parkinson’s disease.

Saw Palmetto is mainly used for urinary symptoms associated with enlarged prostate gland though there is not enough research evidence to confirm this. It does seem to be well tolerated by most people, with only mild side effects such as stomach upset. Saw Palmetto is only one of many herbal remedies that have been marketed without clear substantiation of their claims of efficacy.

Consumers need to be aware of deceptive or questionable marketing practices and to remain sceptical of untoward claims that an herbal remedy can treat, prevent or cure diseases such as cancer, heart disease or diabetes. While herbs can be helpful in treating symptoms and improving overall health and immune function, caution needs to be applied when considering whether to substitute herbs for conventional medical treatment. For the most part, herbs have not been tested as thoroughly as pharmaceuticals and their effects and side effects are not as clearly known. Being well informed is an essential precondition for choosing treatments that are right for you.

Before choosing to take an herbal remedy, be clear about the benefits that you are looking for. Carefully research the products that you are considering so that you understand how they work, what side effects to expect, and whether they will interact with other medications you may be taking. Choose products from reliable manufacturers who can verify active ingredients and their percentage in the product. Read labels carefully so that you understand the recommended dosage and frequency. Then adhere to the recommendations. As well, check the ingredient list carefully for any allergens.

It is important that your primary health care provider be aware of any herbal remedies that you are taking. This way you can discuss what is best for your overall health, you can better understand what precautions you might need to take, and you can prevent possible medication interactions. Take all of your medications, including herbal remedies, with you when you visit a doctor so that your complete treatment regimen can be reviewed.

Other general recommendations apply when taking herbal remedies: do not replace prescribed medications with herbal remedies without discussing this with your health care provider; be cautious about taking herbals if you are pregnant or breast feeding; stop taking herbs at least 7 days before any surgery or dental procedure; time doses so that you do not take herbs and medications at the same time; be alert for any adverse effects and interactions with lab tests.

While the public is looking to “natural” products as safe alternatives to pharmaceuticals, it is clear that herbal remedies are not benign substances. They contain active ingredients that act in the body in much the same way as manufactured drugs and need to be regarded with the same amount of caution. By becoming well informed about herbal treatments and their effects in the body you can make choices that are right for you. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine offers a guide to herbal supplements entitled “Herbs at a Glance: A Quick Guide to Herbal Supplements” which provides comprehensive information on the use of herbs, side effects and cautions, and research evidence. Visit their website at <http://nccam.nih.gov/> to download this guide.