

## **Common Herbs, Dietary Supplements, and Drug interactions**

Millions of Americans take dietary supplements. This may range from herbs, to vitamins to hormones. Unfortunately, many of these seemingly harmless supplements can cause unwanted side effects when combined with medications.

### **It's no big deal**

Most people think of herbs and supplements as no big deal- all good without side effects. The truth is that if it has an effect, it has a side effect.

### **Many don't tell**

Many people however take the safety over the counter products for granted, not knowing that there is no regulation of the consistency or manufacturing process of these products. Adulteration of herbal products is an all too common occurrence. Some think that they will be embarrassed if the doctor finds out they have been supplementing his care. Thus people overlook or forget to tell their doctors that they are taking supplements. This can cause dire problems when the doctor prescribes medications and the two interact.

### **When to stop**

A good rule of thumb is to stop all dietary supplements two to three weeks prior to starting a new medication that could interact with it. This should allow enough time for your body to 'detox' itself from the effects of the supplements.

### **Bring in the container**

If you are not sure about a product, bring in the original container with you to your pre-op visits with the surgeon and anesthesiologist. This will help the Doctor in identifying active ingredients so appropriate plans can be made.

### **Why do people take supplements?**

People generally take supplements if traditional allopathic therapy is ineffective, unpleasant or expensive. Herbal therapies make claims of effects that are not accepted by conventional physicians, such as detoxifiers, tonics, and blood or organ purifiers. People like the fact that the products say they are natural, believing that nature is better than anything synthetic is from a factory. The sheer feeling that you, rather than a doctor, have control over your own fate is appealing.

### **Good Intentions**

It is clear that people take supplements with good intentions. They take advice from friends, the news, relatives, the internet, and from the salesman at the health store. Because most physicians have seen little hard evidence supporting the use of supplements, they tend to be skeptical about claims. But since they understand that the placebo effect is strong, and that many herbs do have real and verifiable effects, most will not actively dissuade people from taking them.

## **Popular supplements that can be harmful**

This is not intended to be a complete list of herbal effects and interactions. It is intended to give people a basis for thought, so a rational discussion can take place with your doctor about taking these products with your medications.

### **Effecting the Heart**

#### **Ma Huang**

Also known as ephedra, this herb has been used to treat the cold, flu, low blood pressure, fever, asthma, arthritis, and fluid retention. American Indians applied it externally to help heal sores. Most Americans now use it to lose weight. Ma Huang is a heart stimulant, making it beat faster and harder. Numerous fatalities have been attributed to use of the drug. Concentrations of the drug in herbal preparations is extremely variable, and may have contributed to some deaths. This herb may make a person more susceptible to heart problems during anesthesia, including low blood pressure and arrhythmia's. It should not be taken with MAO inhibitors, methyldopa, oxytocin. Caffeine, beta blokcers, St. Johns wort, guanethidine, cardiac glycosides.

Other common herbs which can effect the heart or blood pressure include black cohosh, broom, California poppy, sassafras, sarsparilla, dandelion, wild pansy. Alcohol and Vitamin E also can act as blood thinners.

### **Increased Risk of Bleeding- the "G's"**

#### **Garlic**

Garlic may lower cholesterol, and have antioxidant effects. Effects on lowering blood pressure have been studied but not substantiated. Importantly, garlic can increase the risk of bleeding with any invasive procedure. It should not be taken with other drugs or herbs that thin the blood, such as anti-inflammatories, and warfarin (Coumadin).

#### **Ginger**

Ginger has been used for sea sickness, nausea, vertigo, and morning sickness with pregnancy. Studies have not found it effective for nausea after surgery however. Ginger does however prolong bleeding time, and thus can increase the risk of hematoma or increase blood loss during surgery. It should not be taken with other drugs or herbs that thin the blood, such as anti-inflammatories, and warfarin (Coumadin).

#### **Gingko Biloba**

This is one of the best selling herbs on the market. It is derived from the leaves of the long living gingko tree. The herb is used for improving cognitive performance in the elderly, and for intermittent claudication. The herb does possess an aspirin like effect and has caused bleeding in some people. It should

not be taken with other drugs or herbs that thin the blood, such as anti-inflammatories, and warfarin (Coumadin). Gingko may also decrease the effectiveness of epilepsy drugs, and increase the risk of seizures in people taking tricyclic antidepressants (Elavil).

### **Ginseng**

Used in ancient times as an aphrodisiac, today it is used as an antioxidant and to boost "energy levels". Studies have shown effects on the adrenal gland, which controls blood sugar and the immune system to side effects are known to be nausea, high blood pressure, insomnia, headache, and nose bleeds. It should be avoided in diabetics and patients on blood thinners. One death has been reported with simultaneous use of ginseng and *ma huang*.

### **Feverfew**

It is used as an insecticide in Mexico, but in the US it is used to treat migraine headaches. It is thought to work by blocking serotonin release from blood platelets. It can cause increased bleeding, and stomach ulcers. Suddenly stopping feverfew can cause nervousness, headaches, stiff joints, insomnia and fatigue. . It should not be taken with other drugs or herbs that thin the blood, such as anti-inflammatories, Vitamin E, and warfarin (Coumadin).

Other herbs that thin the blood are Alfalfa, barberry, Bromelains, grapefruit extract, goldenseal, St. John's wort, Oregon grape, and cinnabar root.

### **Making you sleepy**

#### **Echinacea**

This is from the daisy family. It may increase the response of certain immune cells. The most common side effect is a bad taste in the mouth. It can cross react with other allergens causing a severe allergic reaction in some people when taken even for the first time. It can be injurious to the liver, and should not be taken with other potential harmful drugs for the liver such as anabolic steroids or ketoconazole. It can potentiate the effects of barbiturates. It may offset the desired immunosuppressive effects of cortisone and cyclosporin.

#### **Kava**

Kava is taken for anxiety. It also has anesthetic and pain relieving properties. It has been purported to increase sleep and is used in Germany for Gonorrhoea. However, it can cause skin problems, and hallucinations. It should not be taken with alcohol or by depressed people. It can cause excessive sedation if taken with other medications causing sleepiness, such as barbiturates and benzodiazepines.

#### **Valerian**

Valerian is used for sedative and muscle relaxant effects, can increase the effectiveness of epilepsy medications, and prolong anesthetic action. It should not be taken with alcohol, sleeping medications, or sedatives.

Of course, recreational drugs and alcohol can have devastating effects with pain medications, and should be avoided.

### **St John's wort**

St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is used to treat minor depressive symptoms. In Germany, it is approved to treat depression, anxiety, sleep disorders and vitiligo. Interestingly, *Hypericum* has been historically used to dye wool or silk a deep violet red. Just like any medication you put into your body, there are both good and potentially harmful effects.

Studies have documented that St. John's wort may increase the toxicity of Antidepressant drugs known as SSRI's such as Prozac (fluoxetine), Paxil (paroxetine) and Serzone (nefazone). St John's wort may lower the concentration of some drugs in the body, making them less effective. These include Cyclosporin, Coumadin (warfarin), digoxin (Lanoxin), theophylline and Elavil (amitriptyline).

The known side effects of St. John's wort include dry mouth, dizziness, fatigue, constipation and nausea. The most prominent side effect is of skin sensitivity to light (photosensitivity). It is recommended that it not be taken with other medications that also cause photosensitivity, such as antibiotics such as tetracycline, and anti-inflammatories such as piroxicam.

Because St. John's wort may be an MAO inhibitor, it may cause problems when taken with ma huang, pseudoephedrine (Sudafed), Demerol, and other monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors (phenylzine).

### **Be at your best**

With pain, the body is under stress. This causes a cascade of hormones and other chemicals to be released in the body. Your doctors can do wonders at keeping your body in balance if they know as much about you as possible, including all herbs, supplements and vitamins you take. With a good pain treatment plan, the idea is that you be at your very best, so that the result is the very best. The experts at Newport Pain Management can help guide you through the maze of herbs, drugs and reactions so you can recover as fast as possible.