

# *Using Medicinal Herbs Wisely*

Resources Provided

By

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# Alternative Medicine: Definitions

## What Is Alternative Medicine?

Alternative medicine is any form of practice that is outside the realm of conventional modern medicine. It covers a broad range of healing philosophies, approaches, and therapies. Most of these treatments and health care practices are not taught widely in medical schools. Examples are naturopathy, chiropractic, ayurveda, homeopathy and acupuncture. (A complete listing of alternative medical practices are given later.)

## What is Complementary Medicine?

If alternative medicine or therapy is used alone or instead of conventional medicine, it is called "alternative" medicine. If the treatment or therapy is done along with or in addition to conventional medicine, it is referred to as "Complementary Medicine" as the two practices complements each other. For example, many Chinese hospitals use acupuncture to reduce the pain during the surgery instead of anesthetics. This is complementary medicine. Later, we refer to the use of sesame oil as a complementary treatment for cancer. Dean Ornish uses life style changes to combat heart disease. These are all examples of complementary medicine.

## What is Holistic Medicine?

Many of the alternative practices pay attention to the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health, in addition to the physical body. Therapies like hypnosis and visualization claims to be able to change physical conditions through purely mental interventions. They believe that our bodies are remarkably resilient machines, capable, with some occasional prodding or intervention, of healing themselves. The name "holistic medicine" came from this unification of the mind and the body. Holistic practitioners treat the "whole person" as opposed to the individual organs of the body where symptoms occur. The importance of self care and preventing illness are stressed by holistic practitioners.

## What is Natural Medicine?

Any therapy that relies on the body's own healing powers may be considered natural medicine. These include herbal remedies, diet and water therapies.

## Medicine - Herb/Food Interactions

### Herbs and Foods May Lead to Complications If You Take Them with Drugs

Many people have the mistaken notion that, being natural, all herbs and foods are safe. This is not so. Very often, herbs and foods may interact with medications you normally take that result in serious side reactions. It is always a good practice to tell your doctor or health practitioners what you are taking so that they can advise you of possible complications, if there is any. You should also keep an eye for unusual symptoms. Very often, this may foretell the symptoms of a drug interaction.

Experts suggest that natural does not mean it is completely safe. Everything you put in your mouth has the potential to interact with something else. The medication that is taken by mouth travels through the digestive system in much the same way as food and herbs taken orally do. So, when a drug is mixed with food or another herb, each can alter the way the body metabolizes the other. Some drugs interfere with the body's ability to absorb nutrients. Similarly, some herbs and foods can lessen or increase the impact of a drug.

- Alcohol is a drug that interacts with almost every medication, especially antidepressants and other drugs that affect the brain and nervous system.
- Some dietary components increase the risk of side effects. Theophylline, a medication administered to treat asthma, contains xanthines, which are also found in tea, coffee, chocolate, and other sources of caffeine. Consuming large amounts of these substances while taking theophylline increases the risk of drug toxicity.
- Certain vitamins and minerals impact on medications too. Large amounts of broccoli, spinach, and other green leafy vegetables high in vitamin K, which promotes the formation of blood clots, can counteract the effects of heparin, warfarin, and other drugs given to prevent clotting.
- Dietary fiber also affects drug absorption. Pectin and other soluble fibers slow down the absorption of acetaminophen, a popular painkiller. Bran and other insoluble fibers have a similar effect on digoxin, a major heart medication.

As more and more people discover new herbs, there is more and more potential for the abuse of these herbs and the patients may end up in serious problems.

I was attending an herb meeting a few weeks ago and a person came to the speaker and told her that she had very good luck with St. John's Wort to control her depression. St. John's Wort has been shown to have great potential to control minor depression. The National Institutes of Health is conducting a clinical study to determine the effect of St. John's Wort scientifically. This person, however, continued saying that she is now trying St. John's Wort for her OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). Now, this is getting into unproven uncharted territory. If you are taking prescription medication for this disorder, you can get into trouble due to drug interaction. As shown under the discussion on St. John's Wort, the herb can be quite dangerous, as it acts similar to MAO inhibitors. They have severe side reactions, and if not careful, can even lead to death.

High-risk patients, such as the elderly, patients taking three or more medications for chronic conditions, patients suffering from diabetes, hypertension, depression, high cholesterol or congestive heart failure, should be especially on the lookout for such side reactions.

The following are the examples of known interaction between popular herbs, foods, and prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

**Hawthorn**, touted as effective in reducing angina attacks by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels, should never be taken with Lanoxin (digoxin), the medication prescribed for most for heart ailments. The mix can lower your heart rate too much, causing blood to pool, bringing on possible heart failure.

**Ginseng**, according to research, can increase blood pressure, making it dangerous for those trying to keep their blood pressure under control. Ginseng, garlic or supplements containing ginger, when taken with the blood-thinning drug, Coumadin, can cause bleeding episodes. Coumadin is a very powerful drug that leaves little room for error, and patients taking it should never take any medication or otherwise before consulting a qualified health professional. In rare cases, ginseng may overstimulate resulting in insomnia. Consuming caffeine with ginseng increases the risk of overstimulation and gastrointestinal upset. Long term use of ginseng may cause menstrual abnormalities and breast tenderness in some women. Ginseng is not recommended for pregnant or lactating women.

**Garlic** capsules combined with diabetes medication can cause a dangerous decrease in blood sugars. Some people who are sensitive to garlic may experience heartburn and flatulence. Garlic has anti-clotting properties. You should check with your doctor if you are taking anticoagulant drugs.

**Goldenseal** is used for coughs, stomach upsets, menstrual problems and even arthritis. However, the plant's active ingredient will raise blood pressure, complicating treatment for those taking antihypertensive medications, especially beta-blockers. For patients taking medication to control diabetes or kidney disease, this herb can cause dangerous electrolyte imbalance. High amount of consumption can lead to gastrointestinal distress and possible nervous system effects. Not recommended for pregnant or lactating women.

**Feverfew**, believed to be the natural remedy for migraine headaches, should never be taken with Imitrex or other migraine medications. It can result in the patient's heart rate and blood pressure to rise dangerous levels.

**Guarana**, an alternative remedy being used as a stimulant and diet aid, contains 3 percent to 5 percent more caffeine than a cup of coffee. So, if you are taking any medication that advises you against taking any drink with caffeine, you should avoid taking this stimulant. It may cause insomnia, trembling, anxiety, palpitations, urinary frequency, and hyperactivity. Avoid during pregnancy and lactation period. Long term use of Guarana may lead to decreased fertility, cardiovascular disease, and several forms of cancer.

**Kava**, a herb that has antianxiety, pain relieving, muscle relaxing and anticonvulsant effects, should not be taken together with substances that also act on the central nervous system, such as alcohol, barbiturates, anti depressants, and antipsychotic drugs.

**St. John's Wort** is a popular herb used for the treatment of mild depression.

The active ingredient of St. John's Wort is hypericin. Hypericin is believed to exert a similar influence on the brain as the monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors such as the one in major antidepressants. Mixing MAO inhibitors with foods high in tyramine, an amino acid, produces one of the most dramatic and dangerous food-drug interactions. Symptoms, which can occur within minutes of ingesting such foods while taking an MAO inhibitor, include rapid rise in blood pressure, a severe headache, and perhaps collapse and even death. Foods high in tyramine include aged cheese, chicken liver, Chianti (and certain other red wines), yeast extracts, bologna (and other processed meats), dried or pickled fish, legumes, soy sauce, ale, and beer.

Some patients report that Saint Johns Wort caused excessive stimulation and sometimes dizziness, agitation and confusion when taken with other antidepressants or over-the-counter medications like Maximum Strength Dexatrim and Acutrim. It also caused their blood pressure to shoot up.

**White Willow**, an herb traditionally used for fever, headache, pain, and rheumatic complaints may lead to gastrointestinal irritation, if used for a long time. It exhibits similar reactions as aspirin (aspirin is derived from white willow). Long term use may lead to stomach ulcers.

### Drug Interaction and Food

Drug interaction risk isn't limited to herbal supplements. Certain foods can interact with medications.

People taking digoxin should avoid **Black licorice** (which contains the ingredient glycyrrhizin). Together, they can produce irregular heart rhythms and cardiac arrest; licorice and diuretics will produce dangerously low potassium levels, putting a patient at risk for numbing weakness, muscle pain and even paralysis. Licorice can also interact with blood pressure medication or any calcium channel blockers.

**Aged cheese** (brie, parmesan, cheddar and Roquefort), fava beans, sauerkraut, Italian green beans, some beers, red wine, pepperoni and overly ripe avocados should be avoided by people taking MAO antidepressants. The interaction can cause a potentially fatal rise in blood pressure.

And because Saint Johns Wort contains the same properties as these MAO antidepressants, it stands to reason that people ingesting the herb should avoid these same foods.

**Grapefruit juice** interacts with calcium channel blockers (including Calan, Procardia, Nifedipine, and Verapamil), cholesterol control medications, some psychiatric medications, estrogen, oral contraceptives and many allergy medications (Seldane, Hismanal). The juice modifies the body's way of metabolizing the medication, affecting the liver's ability to work the drug through a person's system. [More Information.](#)

**Orange juice** shouldn't be consumed with antacids containing aluminum. The juice increases the absorption of the aluminum. Orange Juice and milk should be avoided when taking antibiotics. The juice's acidity decreases the effectiveness of antibiotics, as does milk.

**Milk** also doesn't mix with laxatives containing bisacodyl (Correctol and Dulcolax). You might find the laxative works a little "too well" in the morning.

Large amounts of **oatmeal** and other high-fiber cereals should not be eaten when taking digoxin. The fiber can interfere with the absorption of the drug, making the act of swallowing the pill a waste of time.

However, don't stop eating your cereal right away, because that could cause digoxin levels in your system to soar to toxic levels. A professional should make the dietary changes after carefully examining the digoxin levels.

**Leafy green vegetables**, high in vitamin K, should not be taken in great quantities while taking Coumadin. These vegetables could totally negate the effects of the drug and cause blood clotting.

**Caffeinated beverages** and asthma drugs taken together can cause excessive excitability. Those taking Tagament (Simetidine), quinolone antibiotics (Cipro, Penetrex, Noroxin) and even oral contraceptives should be aware these drugs may cause their cup of coffee to give them more of a Java jolt than they expected.

**Grilled meat** can lead to problems for those on asthma medications containing theophyllines. The chemical compounds formed when meat is grilled somehow prevent this type of medication from working effectively, increasing the possibility of an unmanageable asthma attack.

Regularly consuming **a diet high in fat** while taking anti-inflammatory and arthritis medications can cause kidney damage and can leave the patient feeling, drowsy and sedated.

**Alcoholic beverages** tend to increase the depressive effects of medications such as benzodiazepines, antihistamines, antidepressants, antipsychotics, muscle relaxants, narcotics, or any drug with sedative actions.

It's a good idea to not consume any alcoholic beverages, or at least scale way back, when taking prescription medications. Antioxidant and beta-carotene intensify alcohol's effect on the liver.

Other commonly used over-the-counter medications can cause interaction problems also.

**Aspirin** can modify the effectiveness of arthritis medications, strong prescription steroids and diuretics. Combining aspirin with diabetic medications can drop blood sugars to dangerous levels. Aspirin can also cause toxicity when taken with glaucoma and anticonvulsant (anti-seizure) drugs and cause bleeding episodes when combined with a blood thinner, like Coumadin.

**Acetaminophen** can also cause interaction complications when overused. Heavy drinkers who take acetaminophen for hangover relief risk liver damage. Taking high doses of acetaminophen with Coumadin can cause bleeding episodes.

**Antacids** taken with antibiotics, heart and blood pressure or thyroid medications can decrease drug absorption by up to 90 percent.

**Over-the-counter antihistamines** - sold under the names Actifed, Theraflu, Dimetapp, Benadryl and Comtrex should be avoided if you are taking antianxiety or antidepressant medications.

**Oral contraceptives** are less effective when taken with barbiturates, antibiotics, anti-fungal or tuberculosis drugs.

**Turnips** contain two goitrogenic substances, progoitrin and gluconasturtin, which can interfere with the thyroid gland's ability to make its hormones. Although moderate consumption of goitrogens is not a hazard for healthy people, they can promote development of a goiter (an enlarged thyroid) in persons with thyroid disease.

**Tomato** contains small quantities of a toxic substance known as solanine that may trigger headaches in susceptible people. They are also a relatively common cause of allergies. An unidentified substance in tomatoes and tomato-based products can cause acid reflux, leading to indigestion and heartburn. Individuals who often have digestive upsets should try eliminating tomatoes for 2 to 3 weeks to see if there is any improvement.

**Strawberries, Raspberries, Spinach, and Rhubarb:** These contain oxalic acid, which can aggravate kidney and bladder stones in susceptible people, and reduce body's ability to absorb iron and calcium.

**Raspberries** contain a natural salicylate that can cause an allergic reaction in aspirin sensitive people.

The **seeds from fruits such as Apple, apricot, and Quinces** contain amygdalin, a compound that turns into Hydrogen Cyanide in the stomach. Eating large amount of seeds can result in cyanide poisoning.

**Potatoes:** Avoid potatoes with a green tint to the skin, and remove any sprouts; they will taste bitter and may contain solanine, a toxic substance that can cause diarrhea, cramps, and fatigue.

**Plums, Peaches, Apricots, and Cherries:** These fruits may produce allergic reaction in individuals with confirmed allergies to apricots, almonds, peaches, and cherries. People who are allergic to aspirin may also encounter problems after they have eaten plums or peaches as they contain salicylates. The pits of plums, peaches and apricots contain a compound called amygdalin. When consumed in large amounts, amygdalin breaks down into hydrogen cyanide, a poison.

**Horseradish:** Very high doses of horseradish can cause vomiting or excessive sweating. Avoid if you have hypothyroidism.

**Turmeric:** Should be avoided by persons with symptoms from gallstones.

The drug food interaction is summarized in the table below.

Drugs	Effects and Precautions
<b>Antibiotics</b>	
Cephalosporins, penicillin	Take on an empty stomach to speed absorption of the drugs.
Erythromycin	Don't take with fruit juice or wine, which decrease the drug's effectiveness.
Sulfa drugs	Increase the risk of Vitamin B-12 deficiency
Tetracycline	Dairy products reduce the drug's effectiveness. Lowers Vitamin C absorption
<b>Anticonvulsants</b>	
Dilantin, phenobarbital	Increase the risk of anemia and nerve problems due to deficiency of folate and other B vitamins.
<b>Antidepressants</b>	
Fluoxetine	Reduce appetite and can lead to excessive weight loss
Lithium	A low-salt diet increases the risk of lithium toxicity; excessive salt reduces the drug's efficacy

MAO Inhibitors	Foods high in tyramine (aged cheeses, processed meats, legumes, wine, beer, among others) can bring on a hypertensive crisis.
Tricyclics	Many foods, especially legumes, meat, fish, and foods high in Vitamin C, reduce absorption of the drugs.
<b>Antihypertensives, Heart Medications</b>	
ACE inhibitors	Take on an empty stomach to improve the absorption of the drugs.
Alpha blockers	Take with liquid or food to avoid excessive drop in blood pressure.
Antiarrhythmic drugs	Avoid caffeine, which increases the risk of irregular heartbeat.
Beta blockers	Take on an empty stomach; food, especially meat, increases the drug's effects and can cause dizziness and low blood pressure.
Digitalis	Avoid taking with milk and high fiber foods, which reduce absorption, increases potassium loss.
Diuretics	Increase the risk of potassium deficiency.
Potassium sparing diuretics	Unless a doctor advises otherwise, don't take diuretics with potassium supplements or salt substitutes, which can cause potassium overload.
Thiazide diuretics	Increase the reaction to MSG.
<b>Asthma Drugs</b>	
Pseudoephedrine	Avoid caffeine, which increase feelings of anxiety and nervousness.
Theophylline	Charbroiled foods and high protein diet reduce absorption. Caffeine increases the risk of drug toxicity.
<b>Cholesterol Lowering Drugs</b>	
Cholestyramine	Increases the excretion of folate and vitamins A, D, E, and K.
Gemfibrozil	Avoid fatty foods, which decrease the drug's efficacy in lowering cholesterol.
<b>Heartburn and Ulcer Medications</b>	
Antacids	Interfere with the absorption of many minerals; for maximum benefit, take medication 1 hour after eating.
Cimetidine, Famotidine, Sucralfate	Avoid high protein foods, caffeine, and other items that increase stomach acidity.
<b>Hormone Preparations</b>	

## Herb/Food Interactions

Oral contraceptives	Salty foods increase fluid retention. Drugs reduce the absorption of folate, vitamin B-6, and other nutrients; increase intake of foods high in these nutrients to avoid deficiencies.
Steroids	Salty foods increase fluid retention. Increase intake of foods high in calcium, vitamin K, potassium, and protein to avoid deficiencies.
Thyroid drugs	Iodine-rich foods lower the drug's efficacy.
<b>Laxatives</b>	
Mineral Oils	Overuse can cause a deficiency of vitamins A, D, E, and K.
<b>Painkillers</b>	
Aspirin and stronger non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs	Always take with food to lower the risk of gastrointestinal irritation; avoid taking with alcohol, which increases the risk of bleeding. Frequent use of these drugs lowers the absorption of folate and vitamin C.
Codeine	Increase fiber and water intake to avoid constipation.
<b>Sleeping Pills, Tranquilizers</b>	
Benzodiazepines	Never take with alcohol. Caffeine increases anxiety and reduce drug's effectiveness.

## Herb Drug Interactions

People are buying herbal remedies for every-thing from migraines to memory preservation to depression. Where once you had to see an herbalist or naturopath to get the daily dose of herbs for what ails you, herbal products now are widely available on drugstore shelves and in health food stores, making the ability to self-medicate greater than ever. But with that opportunity comes a warning: mixing herbal remedies and prescription drugs could be harmful to your health.

Just like drug-drug and drug-food interactions, herb drug interactions are very common. Some herbal medicines may cancel the effect of a prescription drug, others may reduce it, or even exaggerate it.

Part of the problem is many people don't tell their doctors they are taking herbal remedies. "A lot of doctors are not so receptive about this so patients fear telling them and keep it to themselves," says Krawchenko's colleague, pharmacist Zoltan Wighardt. "I think there's a lot of self-medicating going on." Dr. Michael Cameron, a Hamilton family doctor with an interest in complementary medicine, feels doctors often express disapproval or change the subject when patients inquire about herbal remedies. A lot of pharmacists are now tracking medications on computer and can tell you if your drugs and herbs are conflicting with each other."

Cameron also points to pharmacists as a good source of information. "If your doctor doesn't know or isn't sympathetic, then head to a pharmacist and ask them." Bookstores also have entire shelves devoted to herbalism these days, and many outline possible drug interactions.

Since herb drug interactions aren't predictable, and are possible, especially if you're taking a range of prescriptions and herbal remedies. So it's best to play it safe and study the herbal medicine before adding it to your pillbox.

### Herb Drug Interactions

**Dong Quai:** taken for menopausal symptom control. Do not mix Dong Quai with warfarin (anticoagulants), St John's Wort and some antibiotics such as sulfonamides, quinolones.

**Echinacea:** mostly taken as an immune boost to prevent cold and flu. Do not mix Echinacea with some heart medications, antifungal medications, HIV medications and anti-anxiety medications.

**Ephedra:** A powerful decongestant. Contains ephedrine, which can open up bronchial passages. It's controversial because it's a powerful stimulant that can raise blood pressure, cause insomnia and **high blood pressure**. Do not mix with heart medications or if you are being treated for high blood pressure, glaucoma or thyroid problems.

**Feverfew:** taken to reduce the severity of migraines. Do not take with other migraine medications, as, it may raise heart rate and blood pressure. Feverfew has

the potential to react with warfarin anti-coagulants, increasing the thinning of blood.

**Ginkgo:** increases blood flow and circulation throughout the body, can also help improve memory. May interact with anti-coagulant medications such as Aspirin, Coumadin, heparin and warfarin, causing the blood to thin too much, and provoking a serious bleeding disorder. A recent report in the New England Journal of Medicine describes a case of a man who'd been taking Aspirin to prevent a heart attack and had spontaneous bleeding into the eye from the iris within a week of taking a daily dose of ginkgo.

**Garlic:** is thought to help lower cholesterol and prevent the formation of blood clots that could lead to heart attacks. Garlic capsules may increase blood thinning if you are already on anti-coagulants. Do not take with diabetes medication because it may cause a decrease in blood sugars.

**Ginseng:** used to help reduce stress, boost energy and improve stamina, and may also help lower cholesterol. Can cause nervousness and excitation, and overuse can lead to headaches, insomnia and heart palpitations. Can increase blood pressure. Should not be used if you are taking prescriptions for **high blood pressure** or Coumadin.

**Hawthorn:** claimed to be effective in helping reduce angina attacks by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Should not be taken digoxin, a heart medication. The mix may lower heart rate too much.

**Kava:** is used to treat anxiety. It's also used to relieve insomnia and nervousness. Do not take Kava if you have a history of liver problems. Also do not mix with antidepressants, sedatives, and do not mix Kava with alcohol.

**Licorice:** used to treat coughs, colds and peptic ulcers. High doses can lead to increased blood pressure, water retention and potassium loss. Do not use with diuretics or digoxin because it could lead to further loss of potassium, essential for heart function.

**St. John's wort:** a natural anti-depressant for mild to moderate depression. Do not take with other anti-depressants, HIV medications, oral contraceptives, some heart/blood thinning medications and Tamoxifen (a cancer drug).

**Valerian:** a mild sedative with hypnotic effects, used to promote sleep, Should not be taken with alcohol or Valium.

## Medications and Older People

People ages 65 and older consume more prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines than any other age group, according to the National Institute on Aging. Older people tend to have more long-term, chronic illnesses--such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease--than do younger people.

The Food and Drug Administration is working to make drugs safer for older people, who consume a large share of the nation's medications. People over age 65 buy 30 percent of all prescription drugs and 40 percent of all OTC drugs.

"Almost every drug that comes through FDA [for approval] has been examined for effects in the elderly," meaning people over 65, says Robert Temple, M.D., director of one of the FDA's offices of drug evaluation. "If the manufacturer hasn't done a study that includes the elderly, we would usually ask for it."

More than 15 years ago, the agency established guidelines encouraging drug manufacturers to include more elderly patients in their studies of new drugs. The FDA suggested that upper age limits be eliminated in drug studies, and that even patients who had other health problems be allowed to participate if they are able. Including older people in these studies gives information about whether they will respond to the drug differently because of their age or health conditions common in this age group.

In several surveys in the 1980s, the FDA discovered that drug manufacturers had been including older people in their drug studies, but they weren't examining the study results to see if the older participants responded differently to the drugs. Now, they do. Today, new prescription drugs are generally required to have a section in the labeling about their use in the elderly.

Says Temple, "The FDA has done quite a bit and worked fully with academia and industry to change drug testing so that it does analyze the data from elderly patients. We're very serious about wanting these analyses." In fact, The analyses have been a regulatory requirement since 1999.

### **When More Isn't Necessarily Better**

When prescribed and taken appropriately, drugs have many benefits: They treat diseases and infections, help manage symptoms of chronic conditions, and can contribute to an improved quality of life. But medicines can also cause problems, and the medical and physical needs of older people can sometimes make being aware of potential problems especially important.

Of all the problems older people face in taking medication, drug interactions are possibly the most dangerous. When two or more drugs are mixed in the body, they may interact with each other and produce uncomfortable or even dangerous side effects. This is especially a problem for older people because they are much more likely to take more than one drug. The average older person is taking more than four prescription medications at once plus two OTC medications.

It's often necessary to take drugs in combination; it just requires care. High blood pressure, for example, is often treated with several different drugs. Many older people have multiple cardiovascular risk factors--high blood pressure, diabetes, abnormal cholesterol--and will often need multiple drugs to treat them. Unless supervised by a doctor, however, taking a mixture of drugs can be dangerous.

For example, a person who takes a blood-thinning medication should not combine that with aspirin, which will thin the blood even more. And antacids can interfere with absorption of certain drugs for Parkinson's disease, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Before prescribing any new drug to an older patient, a doctor should be aware of all the other drugs the patient may be taking.

"Too often, older people get more drugs without a reassessment of their previous medications," says Madeline Feinberg, Pharm.D., a pharmacist and former director of the Elder Health program of the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy. "That can be disastrous."

### **Watch for Side Effects**

Older people tend to be more sensitive to drugs than younger people are, due to changes in organ function and, in some cases, loss of muscle tissue that can cause the drug to be more concentrated in the blood. They also may be more susceptible to certain side effects, such as a drop in blood pressure. The adage "Start low and go slow" is good advice for the elderly.

Older people who experience dizziness, constipation, upset stomach, sleep changes, diarrhea, incontinence, blurred vision, mood changes, a rash, or other symptoms after taking a drug should call their doctors. The following suggestions may also help:

- Make sure you tell your doctor and pharmacist about all the medicines you take, including prescription and non-prescription medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. You may sometimes have more than one doctor, each prescribing different medicines. Make sure they all know what the others are prescribing, and ask one doctor (such as an internist or general practitioner) to coordinate your drugs.  
"You are a partner in your health care," says Feinberg. "This is a partnership between you, your doctor, and your pharmacist. You need to be assertive and knowledgeable about the medications you take."
- Get all your prescriptions filled at one pharmacy. Your pharmacist can serve as a central point to maintain a list of all your medicines, and can screen for drug interactions to avoid harmful situations.
- Tell your doctor if you are allergic to any medicines.
- Keep track of side effects. New symptoms may not be from old age but from the drug you're taking.
- Learn about your drugs. Find out as much as you can by asking questions and reading the package inserts. Both your doctor and pharmacist should alert you to possible interactions between drugs, how to take any drug properly, and whether there's a less expensive generic drug available.
- Have your doctor review your drugs. If you take a number of drugs, take them all with you on a doctor's visit.
- Ask the doctor, "When can I stop taking this drug?" and, "How do we know this drug is still working?"
- Follow directions. Read the label every time you take the medication to prevent mistakes, and be sure you understand the timing, dose prescribed, and how long to take it. Ask a pharmacist what foods to take with each drug. Some drugs are better absorbed with certain foods, and some drugs shouldn't be taken with certain foods.
- Don't forget to take your medicines. Use a memory aid to help you--a calendar, pill box, or your own system. Whatever works for you is best.

## **Medicine and Special Needs**

Arthritis, poor eyesight, and memory lapses can make it difficult for some older people to take their medications correctly. Studies have shown that between 40 percent and 75 percent of older people don't take their medications at the right time or in the right amount.

A number of strategies can make taking medication easier. Patients with arthritis can ask the pharmacist for an oversized, easy-to-open bottle. For easier reading, ask for large-type labels. If those are not available, use a magnifying glass and read the label under bright light.

Invent a system to remember medication. Even younger people have trouble remembering several medications two or three times a day, with and without food. Devise a plan that fits your daily schedule. Some people use meals or bedtime as cues for remembering drugs. Others use charts, calendars, and special weekly pill boxes, and techniques such as turning medicine bottles upside down, to help them know at a glance if they have taken the medication.

Drug-taking routines should take into account whether the medication works best on an empty or full stomach and whether the doses are spaced properly. To simplify drug-taking, always ask for the easiest dosing schedule that's available for the drug you've been prescribed--just once or twice a day, for example.

Older people with serious memory impairments require assistance from family members or professionals. Adult day care, supervised living facilities, and home health nurses can provide assistance with drugs.

## **Know Your Medications**

Not all older people are in danger of drug interactions and adverse effects. Among healthy older people, medications may have the same physical effects as they do in younger adults. It is primarily when disease interferes that the problems begin.

To guard against potential problems with drugs, however, older people must be knowledgeable about what they take and how it makes them feel.

"We need to have educated patients to tell us how the drugs are working," says Feinberg.

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## **Cutting Costs**

For a new prescription, don't buy a whole bottle but ask for just a few pills. You may have side effects from the medication and have to switch. If you buy just a few, you won't be stuck with a costly bottle of medicine you can't take.

For ongoing conditions, buy medications in the largest quantities you can.

Call around for the lowest price. Pharmacy prices can vary greatly. If you find a drug cheaper elsewhere, ask your regular pharmacist if he or she can match the price.

Other ways to make your prescription dollars go further include:

- Ask for a senior citizen discount.

- Ask for a generic equivalent. These non-brand substitutes are tested to be sure they are chemically identical to the original and they deliver the same amount of the drug to the body in the same amount of time.
  - Get drug samples free. Pharmaceutical companies often give samples of drugs to physicians.
  - Buy store-brand or discount brand over-the-counter products. Ask the pharmacist for recommendations.
  - Find out about drug discount or assistance programs. Check out the [list on the AARP Web site](#) or ask your local chapter of national disease-related organizations (American Diabetes Association, etc.). Financial assistance may also be provided through the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services if you qualify.
  - Try mail order from a reputable pharmacy. Mail-order pharmacies can provide bulk medications at discount prices. Use this service only for long-term drug therapy because it takes a few weeks for delivery. Buying drugs online is another option that can save money. [The Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites \(VIPPS\) Web site](#) will help you find a reputable site.
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### **What to Ask the Doctor**

Before you leave your doctor's office with a new prescription, make sure you fully understand how to take the drug correctly. Your pharmacist can also provide valuable information about how to take your medicines and how to cope with side effects. Ask the following questions:

- What is the name of this drug, and what is it designed to do? Is this a generic or a name-brand product?
- What is the dosing schedule and how do I take it?
- What should I do if I forget a dose?
- What side effects should I expect? What should I do if I experience these side effects?
- How long will I be on this drug?
- How should I store this drug?
- Should I take this on an empty stomach or with food? Is it safe to drink alcohol with this drug?

## Herbs & Medications (Drug Interactions)

From [www.apothecaryherbs.com](http://www.apothecaryherbs.com)

Note: The information contained herein should not be misconstrued as therapeutic recommendations for any disease or symptom. It is not intended to provide medical advice, which should be provided by a licensed medical physician.

\* If you are preparing for surgery, please inform your physician if you have been taking herbs.

## Herbs & Medications (Drug Interactions)

**Q**

If I take diuretics like Thiazide, what herbs might react with my medication?

**A**

Use caution with mixing the following herbs with diuretics: aloe, cascara sagrada, licorice, senna and yarrow.

**Q**

What herbs may interfere with medication absorption?

**A**

Use caution mixing prescription drugs with aloe gel, flaxseed, marshmallow root, and slippery elm inner bark.

**Q**

If I am taking estrogen medications, what herbs should I avoid?

**A**

Avoid black cohosh.

**Q**

If taking heart medications, what herbs should I avoid?

**A**

Avoid blue cohosh - may interact and narrow arteries.

**Q**

I take blood-sugar medication (insulin), what herbs will interfere with this?

**A**

Use caution mixing insulin with bitter melon, cornsilk, dandelion, and prickly pear.

**Q**

I use an anticoagulant drug called Warfarin. Should I avoid herbs?

**A**

Use caution taking anticoagulants with chamomile or garlic - they thin blood, too.

**Q**

I use prescription steroids. Is there a list of herbs to avoid if using this medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing steroid medications with echinacea. (Steroids: Anabolic steroids, Amiodarone, Methotrexate, and Ketoconazole)

**Q**

I take blood pressure medication. Can you tell me what herbs will react with my medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing blood pressure medication (Marplan, Nardil and MAO inhibitors (monoamine oxidase inhibitors) with Ephedra (Ma huang).

**Q**

Any advice on using herbs if you take anticonvulsants?

**A**

Use caution mixing anticonvulsants with Evening primrose oil or Borage root (interaction may lower seizure threshold).

**Q**

I take anticoagulants. What herbs may hinder my medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing anticoagulants like aspirin, coumadin, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (Warfarin) with Feverfew, Garlic, Gingko biloba, and Ginger root. Also if preparing for surgery, tell your physician if you have been taking these herbs.

**Q**

If someone takes nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which herbs will interfere with this medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like aspirin, Digoxin, Heparin, and Warfarin with Ginseng.

**Q**

I take Digoxin for my heart. What herbs can I take with this medication?

**A**

You should use caution mixing heart medications like Digoxin with Hawthorn berries, Plantain, Kyushin, and Uzara root.

**Q**

If you take sedatives, are there certain herbs that I should avoid?

**A**

Yes, use caution mixing sedatives or tranquilizers with Kava or Valerian. Also avoid alcohol. Kava and Valerian are not for pregnancy.

**Q**

I'm diabetic. What herbs will react negatively with my medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing diabetic or any medication with Kareia.

**Q**

I'm using licorice to help balance my hormones. What medications will interfere with licorice?

**A**

Use caution mixing these medications with licorice: Digoxin, Diuretic drugs like Spironolactone, blood pressure medication, and hormonal therapy medications. If you are pregnant, nursing, diabetic, or have kidney or liver disease, you should seek medical advice before using licorice.

**Q**

I take estrogen. Are there herbal supplements I should avoid?

**A**

Use caution mixing hormonal therapies like estrogen or oral contraceptives with Saw palmetto.

**Q**

I have seizures and take medication for this. What herbs may interfere with my medication?

**A**

Use caution mixing anti-seizure drugs like Phenytoin with Shankapulshpi.

**Q**

I take anti-depressants and worry about my herbal supplements interfering with my medications. What herbs should I worry about?

**A**

Use caution mixing anti-depressants, Prozac, Tofranil, Monoamine, oxidase inhibitors, and serotonin Reuptake inhibitors with St. Johnswort. Also if you take light sensitive drugs like Piroxicam and Tetracycline you should exercise caution using St. Johnswort.

Information courtesy of Apothecary Herbs, Inc. P.O. Box 3063, Mooresville, NC 28117 The information contained herein is in no way a complete list of herb and drug interactions. This list will be updated as new information is presented on interactions between herbs and prescription medications.