

## Herbs and Nutritional Supplements

**Dear Dr McCrummen, I recently filled out a dental form that asked me if I was taking "herbs or nutritional supplements". Why would a dental or medical office need to know that? They are natural substances so why would they care? Are some harmful? S.M.**

I recently went to a seminar in Seattle called, "The Impact of Herbal Medicine on Clinical Dentistry" and will share some things I learned. This is not an anti-herb article. There are risks and one should be cautious of indiscriminant use of any medication.

Until the 1940's much of the medicine available was of herbal origin. Today, 25% of common prescription drugs contain ingredients from plants. Over 80% of the world population (4 billion people) uses herbal medicine for some aspect of primary health care. In 2000, \$17 billion was spent on dietary supplements in the U.S. alone.

Herbs are medicines. They can cross react with other medicines, and can cause problems for medical or dental treatment. It is very important that dentists and physicians know about all medicines that are being taken, yet 70% of patients do not tell us about herbs or supplements.

Prescription drugs are written by a health practitioner for treatment of a diagnosed problem, and those drugs are regulated by the FDA. Herbal medicines are classified as dietary supplements, can be sold anywhere, and anyone can pick and chose to take all that they want. Some herbs and combinations can cause serious, long lasting problems, and can even lead to death. A little ginko here, ginseng there, add some ginger, and throw in a bit of garlic and what do you have? Likely a potentially serious bleeding problem, especially if you mix any of these with aspirin or a prescription blood thinner. Other herbs that should be stopped from one to seven days before treatment are ephedra, kava-kava, St Johns Wort, feverfew, aloe, valerian root, co enzyme Q-10, Vitamin E, as well as over 50 more. Most herbs should not be used long term.

A common misconception is that natural means safe. Also, since herbs are not regulated, what you buy may not be what you expect. You could get parsley instead of Echinacea, or a much higher or lower dose than the bottle shows. There can be contaminants, bug particles, mice droppings, or a myriad of things associated with unregulated capsule filling. Accidental substitutions with a more toxic species can easily occur, or pesticides could be present. The plant may be more or less potent due to weather (crop year), fertilizer type, or may have been harvested with other plants that one may be allergic to. There is no monitoring agency for identity of chemicals or potency, no unbiased data supporting safety, effectiveness, or potentially serious side effects. Many herbs come from third world countries that have no rules like the FDA has to try to protect you from harmful products or processing. Collection, storage, packaging, and distribution can all lead to contamination, and herbs can easily be adulterated by "nar'-do-wells".

The University of Arkansas tested 20 ephedra products. Half of the samples had greater than 20% more of this drug, which can cause heart attacks. One sample had no ephedra at all, and one had a variation of 2 to 10 times more chemicals between lots. Their conclusion from this and other studies, "quality control ranges from good to nonexistent".

Advice: Natural is not synonymous with safe. Do not use during pregnancy, with children, or with older people that may be on medicines that do not mix with herbal medicines. Avoid products that use testimonials, or claim quick and dramatic results or secret formulas. Avoid products that are promoted over the telephone, on the pages of magazines and newspapers, by mail order, or through infomercials. Research any herbal medicines that you are going to put into your body, and the internet is a great resource. Some good web sites are [naturaldatabase.com](http://naturaldatabase.com), [americanbotanicalsociety.com](http://americanbotanicalsociety.com), [cspinet.org](http://cspinet.org), [consumerlab.com](http://consumerlab.com), [quackwatch.com](http://quackwatch.com), [herbalgram.org](http://herbalgram.org). Check with your doctors to see if any herbs or supplements will adversely affect your treatment or health.