Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Herbal Remedies and Cancer Treatment

This information explains herbal remedies and how they can affect your treatment.

About herbal remedies

Herbal remedies are any herbs, botanical (plant-based) supplements, or dietary supplements you take for their health benefits. These may come as tablets, capsules, powders, teas, liquid extracts, and fresh or dried plants.

Some herbal remedies can help prevent or manage side effects of cancer or your treatment. The herbal remedies that can help you depend on what symptoms you have and what treatment you're getting.

Even though herbal remedies can feel safe, they may not all be safe. Herbal remedies do not go through the same testing as prescription medicine to make sure they work and are safe.

Some herbal remedies may be harmful. This is because they can:

- Affect how your other medicines work.
- Raise or lower your blood pressure.
- Thin your blood and increase your risk of bleeding.
- Keep radiation therapy from working as well as it should.
- Change how your body reacts to sedation (medicine to make you calmer) or general anesthesia (medicine to make you sleepy).

Talk with your healthcare provider about any herbal remedies or other supplements you are taking. They can provide an open and safe space to talk about these products.

To learn more about herbs and supplements, visit www.aboutherbs.com or call MSK's Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service at 646-608-8550.

Stop taking herbal remedies before your treatment

Stop taking herbal remedies and other dietary supplements 7 days (1 week) before you:

- Have surgery.
- Start chemotherapy.
- Start radiation therapy.
- Have certain procedures. Your healthcare provider will let you know if you need to stop taking herbal remedies before your procedure.

Herbal remedies and other dietary supplements can cause bleeding and affect your treatment. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for when to restart taking herbal remedies.

You can still use some herbs in your food and drinks, such as using spices in cooking and drinking tea. Herbal remedies are stronger than the herbs you cook with.

Common herbal remedies and their effects

These are some common herbs and their side effects on cancer treatments.

Echinacea (EH-kih-NAY-shuh)

- Can cause rare but serious allergic reactions, such as a rash or trouble breathing.
- Can keep medicine that weaken your immune system from working as well as they should.

Garlic

- Can lower your blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- Can increase your risk of bleeding.

Gingko (also known as Gingko biloba)

- Can increase your risk of bleeding.

Ginseng (JIN-seng)

- Can keep sedation or general anesthesia from working as well as they should.
- Can increase your blood pressure.
- Can increase your risk of bleeding.
- Can lower your blood glucose (sugar) level.

Turmeric (TER-mayr-ik)

- Can keep chemotherapy from working as well as it should.

St. John's Wort

- Can keep some medicines from working as well as they should.
- Can make your skin more sensitive to radiation or laser treatment.

Valerian (vuh-LEER-ee-un)

- Can make sedation or general anesthesia affect you more than they should.

Herbal formulas

- Herbal formulas contain many different herbs and dosages.
- Stop taking these products 7 days (1 week) before treatment. Do not start taking herbal formulas again until your healthcare provider tells you it is safe.

This information does not cover all herbal remedies or possible side effects. Talk with your healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns.

Contact information

- To schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in Integrative Medicine and Wellness, call 646-608-8550.
- To make an appointment for Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service's therapies, classes, and workshops, call 646-449-1010.

To learn more, visit www.msk.org/IntegrativeMedicine or read *Integrative Medicine Therapies and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/integrative-therapies).

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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