



**for your best health**

## Forewarned is Forearmed – Using Herbs and Drugs Together

### Ask Your Pharmacist

Herbs have long been considered the medicine of the planet. In many cultures, herbs remain the primary medicine. What scares many of our healthcare professionals is the use of herbs and drugs without understanding the potential dangers and benefits of both. Herbal supplements contain active ingredients that can affect how your body functions, just as over-the-counter and prescription drugs do.

Medication is a miracle of technology and pharmaceutical approaches to health have raised our average life span greatly. This century has seen the elimination of many diseases and the controlling of many more through this miracle. The idea here is not to be scared of the statistic, but rather to know and understand it, as "forewarned is forearmed."

Medications of all kinds, pharmaceuticals or alternatives, should only be taken with intelligence. Knowing what you are placing in your body should be the primary concern for anyone. If you are educated about your medications, you will know what they are intended to treat and what side effects and dangers may accompany the taking of the medicine. While you may not be able to understand all the medical jargon in information sheets or backsides of medicine ads, you still can get basic answers about the medication. Let's remember that we are in the Information Age and there are so many avenues of knowledge available. But, first and foremost, you must be able to get specific answers from healthcare professionals.

Now let's add to the mix the mainstream emergence of natural remedies. Alternative

medicines are popular these days, including homeopathic and herbal remedies, vitamin and mineral therapy, and aromatherapy and acupuncture to name a few. This is both a good and a bad thing. It is a good thing that people are seeking healthcare answers from incredible amounts of new data in these fields. However, it is a bad thing when people "self-heal," based on fads and fluff articles in magazines. It is also a concern to healthcare professionals when people take natural remedies AND pharmaceutical medicine, without checking for potential dangers.

Herbs could be described as drugs based on the actions they can create in the body. Twenty five percent of all current drugs have been developed by isolating an active ingredient from an herb or plant. Many herbs are as potent as their drug counterparts. Please do not buy into the rap that herbs are natural, so they must be safe for our use. It simply is not true. Our research indicates that some supplements and herbs can be very useful and may produce a significant improvement in overall health. However, it should not be assumed that it is safe or appropriate to use these products casually. Some prescription medications can interact with natural products and result in undesirable effects. It is also possible for some prescription medications to cause the body to displace important nutrients and specific supplements may be recommended.

It is known that some herbs will lessen or negate the effect of a medication. The same holds true for medicines that will affect herb use. For instance, an aspirin will negate the effect of Feverfew, an herbal approach to headaches.

Using ginkgo, ginger or ginseng and drugs that help thin the blood, such as coumadin,

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## Using Herbs and Drugs Together (Continued)

may cause the blood to become too thin and unable to coagulate. This could be a big problem during emergency surgery or with an accident.

Other herbs may affect this medication in the same manner, so be careful with natural products when you are taking warfarins. One herb that is getting a lot of press is echinacea. It is often used to quell a respiratory or viral illness, including the common cold. It should not be used, however, with drugs that are used for liver illnesses.

When taking a drug for thyroid disorders, be careful with the use of kelp. This herb contains high levels of iodine, and will affect the medications. This will also affect your testing, so make sure to tell your physician about it.

An alarming statistic shows that 38% of our population is taking natural medicine without telling their doctors or pharmacists.

Doctors and pharmacists are becoming experts in these remedies, but the frightening fact that patients are not telling their doctors about alternatives throws red flags to the entire healthcare industry.

Herbal green tea should be avoided with warfarin, aspirin and hyperthyroid medication. Korean ginseng can reduce the effectiveness of medication for both high blood pressure and diabetes. Similarly, liquorice should not be taken with anti-hypertensive medication or digoxin. Herbal supplements should not be taken with immunosuppressant or chemotherapy drugs.

Herbs and drugs used together can produce different concerns. For instance, some herbs have the same action as drugs and the combination can create too potent an action together. A good example of this is the use of the diuretic herb hawthorne berries. This natural approach to controlling blood pressure can interfere with similar medicines, such as thiazide medications. Another example is hormone replacement drugs, such as Premarin. This medication can be potentially stronger, when used with plants that contain high levels of estrogen, such as soy isoflavones or ginsengs.

One area of health that confuses everyone is mood disorders, including depression. One of the herbs mentioned often in the press is St. John's wort, an herb used for mild to moderate depression. St. John's is known medically as a MAO inhibitor. This class of drugs is dangerous when used in combination with other anti-depressants, such as SSRI's.

As you may know, there is more and more information becoming available regarding natural products and how they should be used appropriately. As your pharmacists, we are in the best position to discuss these important issues with you and we take our responsibility to do so very seriously. We would welcome the opportunity to review your total health care needs including nutritional supplements and herbs to determine what is truly right for you. Please come by or call for an appointment so that we may discuss this important issue. A recurring statistic that gives us great pride is that pharmacists are the most trusted healthcare professional in the community. Allow us to assist you with information you can already trust.

**If you are truly interested in all aspects of your health, you must communicate. You must be the one that takes charge of your health. We are happy to help you in the management of your health, but you must be the one in charge. Perhaps the easiest solution to our healthcare problem is also the one most difficult to achieve. In essence, the patient must be in charge - the captain of their own healthcare team.**