

CAM

About herbs—and MS

by Allen C. Bowling, MD, PhD, and Tom Stewart, JD, MS, PA-C

CAM stands for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a group of diverse therapies and products that are neither part of conventional medicine as taught in U.S. medical schools, nor generally available at U.S. hospitals. The practice of using an unconventional therapy together with conventional medicine is called “complementary medicine.”

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Guidelines for use:

- In general, herbs should be used for a short time for benign, self-limited conditions.
- Buy high-quality products.
- Always discuss herb use (or other dietary supplements) with your physician or health-care practitioner.
- Women who are pregnant or breast-feeding and people who are taking multiple medications will probably be advised not to use herbs.

What is an herb?

An herb is a plant with properties that may improve or maintain health. Herbs were the bedrock of medical treatment for much of human history. Indigenous societies worldwide collected knowledge of plants for healing and health. Some herbs, like coffee and tea, are so commonly used we no longer even think of them as herbs.

Back by popular demand

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ment was traditionally composed only of vitamins and minerals. In 1994, the passage of the Dietary Supplements Health and Education Act (DSHEA) added herbs and other substances (fish oil, for example) to the act that protects the right of consumers to access safe dietary supplements. Since then, herb use in the U.S. has dramati-

cally increased. According to one study, about 20% of U.S. adults used herbs in the previous 12 months, and another recent study found that 36% of people with MS reported using herbs.

Herbs and pharmaceuticals have similarities ...

Both herbs and pharmaceutical drugs have effects that can interact with the body to cause change. Both can improve health and both can some-

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It's important to tell your physician about any dietary supplements or CAM treatments you are considering or taking. It's equally important that your physician listen respectfully to your questions and concerns regarding CAM.



times cause unwanted side effects.

Many pharmaceuticals are literally rooted in herbs. About one quarter of prescription medications and many over-the-counter medicines are derived in some way from plants.

... and important differences

Pharmaceuticals generally consist of a single active ingredient in precise amounts. They have been tested in people under

rigorously controlled conditions, and are tightly regulated in terms of manufacturing and marketing.

Herbs have multiple active ingredients in imprecise amounts. They are loosely regulated in terms of both manufacturing and marketing and are easily purchased by the consumer. Because herbs lack the money-making potential of patent-protected pharmaceutical drugs, less research is conducted on them.



Herbs become MS meds

Herbs are being used to create new pharmaceutical drugs. Two may hold promise for people with MS: marijuana and a fungus well-known in traditional Chinese medicine, **Isaria sinclairii**, which is the basis of fingolimod (FTY720)*.

Practical considerations

Like drugs, herbs can have side effects and can interact with other

herbs or with over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Even herbs generally deemed safe can be unsafe for people with particular medical conditions.

Do some research before you take an herb. Check the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at nccam.nih.gov/health/herbsataglance.htm. The FDA site fda.gov/fdac/features/1998/dietchrt.html lists herbs that are inherently unsafe.

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Dr. Bowling's book **Complementary and Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis** is available from demosmedpub.com.

* See *InsideMS* June/July 2007, p. 22.