



Herbal Medicine A Key Facts

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Editorial Note

An herb is a plant or plant part used for its scent, flavor, or therapeutic properties. Herbal medicines are one type of dietary supplement. They are sold as tablets, capsules, powders, teas, extracts, and fresh or dried plants. People use herbal medicines to try to maintain or improve their health. Many people believe that products labeled "natural" are always safe and good for them. This is not necessarily true. Herbal medicines do not have to go through the testing that drugs do. Some herbs, such as comfrey and ephedra, can cause serious harm. Some herbs can interact with prescription or over-the-counter medicines. Herbal medicine has its origins in ancient cultures. It involves the medicinal use of plants to treat disease and enhance general health and wellbeing. Some herbs have potent (powerful) ingredients and should be taken with the same level of caution as pharmaceutical medications. In fact, many pharmaceutical medications are based on man-made versions of naturally occurring compounds found in plants. For instance, the heart medicine digitalis was derived from the foxglove plant.

Herbal medicine

Herbal medicines contain active ingredients. The active ingredients of many herbal preparations are as yet unknown. Some pharmaceutical medications are based on a single active ingredient derived from a plant source. Practitioners of herbal medicine believe that an active

ingredient can lose its impact or become less safe if used in isolation from the rest of the plant. For instance, salicylic acid is found in the plant meadowsweet and is used to make aspirin. Aspirin can cause the lining of the stomach to bleed, but meadowsweet naturally contains other compounds that prevent irritation from salicylic acid. According to herbal medicine practitioners, the effect of the whole plant is greater than its parts. Critics argue that the nature of herbal medicine makes it difficult to give a measured dose of an active ingredient.

Traditional medicine is "the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health and in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness" There are many different systems of traditional medicine, and the philosophy and practices of each are influenced by the prevailing conditions, environment, and geographic area within which it first evolved (WHO 2005), however, a common philosophy is a holistic approach to life, equilibrium of the mind, body, and the environment, and an emphasis on health rather than on disease. Generally, the focus is on the overall condition of the individual, rather than on the particular ailment or disease from which the patient is suffering, and the use of herbs is a core part of all systems of traditional medicine. Products made from botanicals, or plants, that are used to treat diseases or to maintain health are called herbal products, botanical products, or phytomedicines. A product made from plants and used solely for internal use is called an herbal supplement.