

How to Cut Through the Herbal Hype by Vera Strader

Combine the lure of a miracle treatment with our current interest in all things “natural,” and you get a product few can resist—herbal remedies. Americans plunk down several billion dollars each year in the hopes of treating everything from aches and sprains to blood disorders, even cancer.

Some herbs really do have healing powers. Many modern drugs are purified or synthesized versions of herbs, in an effective, standardized form. For example, a purified form of digitalis, derived from the foxglove plant, is used to treat congestive heart failure and irregular cardiac rhythms.

Unfortunately Americans are encouraged to swallow far more than standardized and tested herbal products. Most people overestimate the extent that laws protect us from herbal misinformation. How can this be?

Even though herbs may act as drugs, they are legally defined as “dietary supplements.” Before a drug can be marketed, it must be *proven safe and effective*. However, in order to remove a supplement from the market, it must be *proven unsafe*, the reverse of drugs. Since there is an ever increasing number of herbal potions available, the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has limited ability to regulate all the myriad products sold over-the-counter and by countless sales people.

The good news: A 2007 federal law tightens rules regarding manufacturing, packaging, labeling, and storing dietary supplements. Nevertheless, given the vast array of supplements on the market, combined with FDA’s and the Federal Trade Commission’s already weighty workload, the law’s impact is likely to be limited. The old adage “Let the Buyer Beware” is still one by which to live.

HERBAL PITFALLS

- Supplements may be manufactured without adherence to any standards:

Accurate plant identification is tricky. Angelica for example, has been confused with similar-appearing but very poisonous water hemlock.

On top of that, true botanical names may vary from time to time and from one country to another. The common herb, milk thistle, is known as *Silybum marianum* (L.) in the United States but *Carduus marianus* L. in Europe and some older publications. Milk thistle may also be confused with an entirely different thistle.

- Identification of the precise plant part and age is also critical. Some milk thistle products contain only leaves rather than the fruit. The leaves are of no therapeutic value.

Fresh gel from the *Aloe vera* leaf can be used as a minor remedy for burns and skin irritations, but when processed may lose its healing powers. When taken

internally, the juice is a strong laxative or cathartic; injections for cancer patients have resulted in several deaths.

- Herbal products may contain unpredictable concentrations and contaminants. In 2008, Consumer Lab found that of seven *Ginkgo biloba* products analyzed, two contained less ginkgo than claimed, one was contaminated with lead and two contained adulterated material.
- Many herbs can interact dangerously with medications. “Consumer Reports on Health” recently published a list of 58 potential drug interactions with nine common herbs including echinacea, garlic, *Ginkgo biloba*, ginseng, and milk thistle. In some cases, even green tea may interact with anticonvulsants, arrhythmia and diabetes drugs, blood thinners, and pain relievers.
- The steady stream of new herbal products appearing on the market adds to the already burdensome challenges faced by regulatory agencies. The result is that only the most extreme cases are prosecuted, such as 2008 action against eleven marketers of bogus cancer cures whose potions included burdock root, sheep sorrel, slippery elm bark, Turkish rhubarb root and chaparral.

WHAT’S THE CONSUMER TO DO? How can you protect your health and your pocket book from the herbal hype?

- Be skeptical of sales pitches based on anecdotes and testimonials or promises of easy fixes. If it sounds too good to be true, it almost surely is. It’s human nature to look for, and to purchase, hope. The placebo effect has been shown to be effective about 30% of the time, reinforcing the beliefs of many users and promoters.
- Though it’s illegal for supplement promoters to claim their products can prevent or treat disease, they can hint and suggest freely. Beware of terms and buzz words like “quick weight loss, shrink, rush order, limited supply, cleanse, secret ingredient, scientific breakthrough, results guaranteed, builds muscles,” and “natural.” (There is no legal definition of the term natural. Poisonous substances can be perfectly natural.) Also pass up any product that implies it can be effective for a wide variety of ailments.
- The more we hear something, the more likely we are to believe; therefore it pays to advertise. We’re bombarded with promotional material ranging from packaging itself (many product names and enclosures *imply* cure or treatment), late night television, and magazines.

The American Council on Science and Health periodically conducts a survey of popular magazine nutrition coverage, rating magazines on accuracy, presentation, and quality of recommendations (www.acsh.org/publications/pubID.1501/pub_detail.asp). The most recent survey

determined that of 21 magazines, only “Consumer Reports” ranked excellent in all three categories. Three of the least accurate were men’s health and fitness magazines.

- Search out reliable herb information before opting to try any product. Two good resources that list herbs, their possible uses, limitations, and adverse reactions are: Tyler’s Honest Herbal: A Sensible Guide to the Use of Herbs and Related Remedies, Steven Foster; Fifth Edition, 2007; and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center’s website, www.mskcc.org/autherbsbo, which includes an ever-expanding list of herbs with both consumer and professional reports.
- Don’t stray from scientifically-based health care. Discuss supplements with your physician and pharmacist and be sure to include any and all supplements when asked to list medications.

Registered Dietitian and Master Gardener, Vera Strader plants numerous culinary and landscaping herbs but steers clear of herbal remedies.