

Herbal Medicine

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Herbal medicine, sometimes referred to as herbalism or botanical medicine, is the use of herbs for therapeutic or medicinal value. Herbal medicine is the oldest form of healthcare known to mankind. An herb is a plant or plant part valued for its medicinal, aromatic or savory qualities.

Herb plants produce and contain a variety of chemical substances that act upon the body. Herbs are less toxic to your body than drugs, generally have less side effects, and help your body to heal under its medicinal influence, in a natural way. Herbs have been used by all cultures throughout history.

Herbal medicine can be broadly classified into various basic systems: Traditional Chinese herbalism, Ayurvedic herbalism, and Western herbalism. These systems originally came from Greece and Rome, travelled to Europe and then spread to the Americas.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 4 billion people, 80 percent of the world population, presently uses herbal medicine for some aspect of primary health care. Herbal medicine is a major component in all indigenous peoples' traditional medicine. Well into the 20th century, much of the pharmacopoeia of scientific medicine was derived from the herbal lore of native peoples.

Many drugs commonly used today are of herbal origin. Indeed, about 25 percent of the prescription drugs dispensed in the United States contain at least one active ingredient derived from plant material. Some are made from plant extracts; others are synthesized to mimic a natural plant compound. Major pharmaceutical companies are currently conducting extensive research on plant materials gathered from the rain forests and beyond for their potential medicinal value.

Botanicals, or herbs, are sold in many forms: as fresh or dried products, liquid or solid; extracts, tablets, capsules, powders, and tea bags. A particular group of chemicals (or a single chemical) may be isolated from a botanical and sold as a dietary supplement, usually in tablet or capsule form. Common preparations include teas, decoctions, tinctures, and extracts.

The action of botanicals range from mild to powerful. Some mild botanicals may have to be taken for weeks or months before their full effects are achieved. The dose and form of a botanical preparation also play important roles in its safety. Teas, tinctures, and extracts have different strengths.

The same amount of a botanical may be contained in a cup of tea, a few teaspoons of tincture, or an even smaller quantity of an extract. It is important to follow the manufacturer's suggested directions for using a botanical and not exceed the recommended dose without the advice of a health care provider.

Herbal health products can affect the way the body processes drugs. When this happens, your medicine may not work the way it should. It is always a good practice to tell your doctor or health practitioner what you are ingesting so that they can advise you of possible complications, if any. The good news is that most herbal medicines are less toxic than pharmaceuticals and can achieve positive results with less side effects.

Consumers state that their primary reason for using herbal supplements is to promote overall health and wellness. As in all specialty practices, to avoid confusion, it is best to consult a professional herbal consultant.

Patient's Guide: How do I use Herbal Medicine?

Herbs are available over the counter at health food stores for purchase, in pill, tea or tincture form. What to buy and how much to use should be prescribed by a professional. To avoid wasting your money buying the wrong thing, or actually doing harm by taking the wrong herbal medicine, it's best to get a referral. Herbs are powerful agents that act by promoting the body's healing response. They are not drugs that act upon you immediately. They take weeks to months to achieve full effect.