

## Herbal medicines: Consult with your doctor before use



One in three Americans has taken herbal medicines in the past year to improve health. Annual purchases soar each year costing \$5 billion in sales.<sup>1</sup> Herbals that have been proven safe and effective deserve to be considered valid options for improving health. However, the effectiveness of many herbs is still not proven, and it's often difficult to tell fact from fiction in books and computer resources about herbs.<sup>2</sup> Many are either for or against herbal medicines, making it difficult to get a true picture of the benefits and risks of using these products.

One important factor to keep in mind is that herbs act like medicines in the body and can cause strong unwanted effects. Table 1 on page 3 lists the 10 most common herbs used in the US, possible uses, side effects, and warnings or interactions with other medicines. As with prescription and over-the-counter medicines, dangerous side effects can occur when taking herbs, particularly if too much of the product is used. To cite one example, chamomile should not be taken if you have a history of asthma or allergic dermatitis, or if you take **warfarin** (**Coumadin**) or other blood thinners.

The herb should also be avoided if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, because it may trigger a miscarriage.<sup>2</sup> Yet, most people would not think to look into the safety of drinking a cup of chamomile tea each night to help with sleep.

If you use herbal medicines, consult with your doctor *before* you start taking the herb, or let your physician and pharmacist know if you are already taking these products. Unfortunately, some studies have found that most patients don't tell their doctors they are taking herbal medicines.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, patients don't consider herbs to be medicine; in other cases, they believe their doctors will criticize them for using the herbs. However, doctors need to know if you are taking these products so that they can accurately judge whether particular symptoms are related to a medical illness or a side effect from an herbal medicine. Those who take herbal products should also keep a reliable, unbiased reference on hand. The National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health offer a comprehensive, free Internet resource that can be accessed at: [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/herbalmedicine.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/herbalmedicine.html).

Table 1 and references appear on page 3 ▶

## All is not as it seems...



**Avandia** (**rosiglitazone**) and **Prandin** (**repaglinide**) are medicines with names that look remarkably similar when handwritten. In the figure to the right, a pharmacist thought the doctor had prescribed **Avandia**, but the prescription was really for

*Prandin 2 mg PO before breakfast  
and 4 mg PO before dinner*

Is this Prandin or Avandia 2 mg PO (by mouth) before breakfast and 4 mg PO before dinner?

**Prandin.** Mix-ups with these two medicines have been occurring

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## 60-second safety tip

■ **Comparing choices.** Which rheumatoid arthritis medicines carry the greatest risk of infection? Which diabetes medicines are most often associated with congestive heart failure? Which medicines for depression are most likely to cause nausea or sleeplessness? Which medicines for high blood pressure cause the least side effects? These questions and many others are answered by the federal government's **Effective Health Care** program, which makes fair comparisons of treatment choices for various health conditions. The program helps consumers and healthcare providers select the most effective treatments. It reviews studies to compare the effectiveness, risks, and cost of different treatments. And then it makes the findings public. The free, easy to read guides are available on the Internet at: <http://effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov/reports/index.cfm>. For print copies, please call: (800) 358-9295, or send an email to: [AHRQPubs@ahrq.hhs.gov](mailto:AHRQPubs@ahrq.hhs.gov).

■ **Summer travel tip.** A woman on vacation in another state got sick and a doctor prescribed an antibiotic, **clarithromycin** (**Biaxin**). She went to a pharmacy near where she was visiting to fill the prescription. Twelve days later,

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**Proper medicine disposal**

 Medicines that are no longer used, needed, or expired should be discarded in a manner that protects your family, pets, community, and environment. Consumers were once told to flush old medicines down the toilet. However, recent studies show that medicines disposed in sewer and septic systems might later be found in very small amounts in the environment.

So the rule of thumb today is: **DO NOT FLUSH** medicines. A few exceptions exist. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has identified thirteen prescription medicines that should be flushed.



View a clip demonstrating one way to properly dispose of prescription medicines.

These medicines are listed in Table 1.

According to the federal government ([www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/factsht/proper\\_disposal.html](http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/factsht/proper_disposal.html)), medicines should be disposed in the following manner:

- Take unused, unneeded, or expired medicines out of their original containers and throw them in the trash. But first mix prescription medicines with an undesirable substance, such as used

coffee grounds or kitty litter, and put them in sealed, plain containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags. This will help prevent children and pets from accidentally getting into the medicine in the trash. It will also discourage adults from removing the medicine from the trash for abuse.

- Flush prescription medicines down the toilet only if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs you to do so (such as those listed in Table 1).

- Some communities have take-back or waste disposal programs that allow you to bring unused drugs to a central location for safe disposal. Ask your pharmacist whether these programs are available in your community.

- Some medicines have specific instructions for safe disposal, such as folding patches with the sticky medicine side together before disposal. So always read the instructions on your medicine and talk to your pharmacist if you have questions.

For additional information about proper medicine disposal, visit: [www.smarxt disposal.net/](http://www.smarxt disposal.net/).

**Table 1.** FDA advises flushing these prescription medicines instead of disposing of them in the trash. This includes both brand (green) and generic versions (red) of the medicines.

<b>Actiq (fentanyl)</b>
<b>Daytrana Patch (methylphenidate)</b>
<b>Duragesic Patch (fentanyl)</b>
<b>OxyContin Tablets (oxycodone)</b>
<b>Avinza Capsules (morphine)</b>
<b>Baraclude Tablets (entecavir)</b>
<b>Reyataz Capsules (atazanavir)</b>
<b>Tequin Tablets (gatifloxacin)</b>
<b>Zerit Oral Solution (stavudine)</b>
<b>Meperidine Tablets</b>
<b>Percocet (oxycodone and acetaminophen)</b>
<b>Xyrem (sodium oxybate)</b>
<b>Fentora (fentanyl buccal tablet)</b>

**Note:** Consumers should always refer to printed material accompanying their medicine for specific instructions.

▶ Brand name medicines appear in green; generic medicines appear in red.

**60-second safety tip**

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after returning home and finishing the antibiotic, she received a call from her mail-order pharmacy company. The pharmacy called to tell her that she should not take **clarithromycin** because she was also taking **Lipitor (atorvastatin)**, a medicine that lowers cholesterol. Although it doesn't happen often, a serious condition that weakens the heart and other muscles can occur when taking both medicines. The woman received **Lipitor** from the mail-order pharmacy she used at home. When she filled the prescription for the antibiotic at the local pharmacy away from home, no one asked her about other medicines she was taking. So **Lipitor** was not listed in the pharmacy computer as one of the medicines the woman takes. Therefore, the pharmacist was unaware that this problem could occur. The woman was not injured but was concerned that this happened. How can it be prevented? Be sure to carry a list of all your medicines while on vacation, even on short getaways. You never know when illness may strike or when you will need a new prescription medicine. Always provide the list of medicines to any doctor you visit and pharmacy where you get a prescription filled. Speak up, even if no one asks about other medicines you take. That way you can help safeguard yourself against serious interactions between different medicines, even while away from home.

**Camphor and seizures in children**

Earlier this year, the New York City Department of Health sent out an alert about using unapproved camphor products to treat a cold, freshen the air, or get rid of insects ([www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr2008/pr006-08.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr2008/pr006-08.shtml)). Three children were admitted to hospitals with seizures after licking or touching over-the-counter (OTC) camphor products.

A 15-month-old girl started vomiting and had a seizure about 40 minutes after licking a cube of camphor. Her parents bought the camphor ("alcanfor" in Spanish) at a local botanica (a store that sells folk medicine and other alternative medicines) to treat the child's cold. The camphor had been placed in a bowl of water on the floor of the child's room and had also been added to the water in a humidifier. In another case, a 22-month-old boy had seizures about 1 hour after his parents found him with a piece of camphor in his


mouth. The family had been using camphor to control roaches by placing it in the corners of rooms. The third case involved a 15-month-old girl who had a seizure after her mother applied a chest rub made from camphor to the child's chest, back, and head every hour for 10 hours to treat a cold. The Health Department is looking at seven more cases of possible camphor poisoning.

The products that caused these poisonings are sold as small white cubes packaged in clear plastic. They **ARE NOT** approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—the government agency responsible for the safety of medicines. Camphor is found in some nasal decongestants (used for a stuffy nose) and pain medicines that are sold in pharmacies. These products **ARE** approved by the FDA, so the amount of camphor in them is controlled. Products that are not approved by the FDA may be unsafe.

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since 1999, the year **Avandia** was first available on the market. In this case, both medicines are used to treat diabetes, so asking doctors to include the purpose of the medicine on these prescriptions may not help prevent a mix-up. Both medicines are also available in 2 mg tablets. In fact, there are few differences to help tell these medicines apart. As a precaution, doctors should include the generic names of these medicines on prescriptions—**rosiglitazone** for **Avandia** and **repaglinide** for **Prandin**. The generic names are more distinct than the brand names when handwritten.

Contact Information

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Herb	Why People May Use This Herb	Examples of Side Effects	Examples of Warnings/Interactions
<b>Echinacea</b>	Treatment or prevention of colds, urinary bladder infections, burns	Rash, dizziness, itching	Immune system can be overstimulated and then depressed with long-term use
<b>St. John's wort</b>	Internal use: depression, anxiety Topical use: burns, skin lesions	Sun sensitivity, upset stomach, dry mouth, restlessness, trouble sleeping, constipation	May interact with birth control medicines, immunosuppressants, cancer medicines, and other medicines for depression
<b>Ginkgo biloba</b>	Poor memory, poor leg circulation, dizziness, ringing in the ears	Upset stomach, headache, seizures, unusual bleeding or bruising	May interact with blood thinners like <b>warfarin</b>
<b>Garlic</b>	High blood pressure, high cholesterol, fatty deposits in arteries	Upset stomach, indigestion, nausea, allergic reactions, dizziness, sweating, underactive thyroid, stimulation of the uterus	May interact with blood thinners like <b>warfarin</b>
<b>Saw palmetto</b>	Benign prostate enlargement	Abdominal or back pain, diarrhea, nausea, painful urination, trouble emptying bladder	Use only if diagnosed with benign prostate enlargement and approved by your doctor
<b>Ginseng</b>	General health promotion and to increase energy levels, sexual function, athletic ability, fertility	Diarrhea, high blood pressure, insomnia, nervousness, chest pain, breast pain, rapid pulse, vaginal bleeding	May interact with drugs used to treat diabetes, blood thinners, depression medicines
<b>Goldenseal</b>	Internal use: upper respiratory infections Topical use: inflammation, antiseptic to clean wounds, skin infections	Diarrhea, high blood pressure, mouth sores, nausea, numbness or tingling in arms or legs, seizures, dangerous heart rhythms	Taking large doses can cause death; may interact with heart and blood pressure medicines and blood thinners
<b>Aloe</b>	Topical use: wound healing, itching, burns Internal use not recommended although oral capsules/extracts are available	Delayed wound healing, diarrhea, reddish urine, dehydration	Avoid taking aloe capsules if you have kidney or heart disease; may interact with <b>digoxin</b> , steroids, water pills
<b>Siberian ginseng</b>	General health promotion and to increase energy levels, sexual function, athletic ability, fertility	Diarrhea, high blood pressure, insomnia, nervousness, blurred vision, pimples, vaginal bleeding, low blood sugar in diabetic patients	Don't use when taking vitamins B1, B2, and C; don't use for more than 3 weeks; may interact with <b>digoxin</b>
<b>Valerian</b>	Insomnia, anxiety, muscle spasms	Fatigue, headaches, irregular heartbeats, excitability, nausea	May interact with sedatives; don't use if you have liver disease

**References:** 1) Garg V, Hershey C. The top 10 herbal therapies. *Postgraduate Medicine online* 2003;8. Retrieved May 12, 2008, at: [www.postgradmed.com/issues/2003/08\\_03/garg.shtml](http://www.postgradmed.com/issues/2003/08_03/garg.shtml). 2) Fetrow CW, Avila JR. The complete guide to herbal medicines. 2000; Springhouse, PA: Springhouse Corporation. 3) Mar C, Bent S. An evidence-based review of the 10 most commonly used herbs. *WJM* 1999;171:168-171.