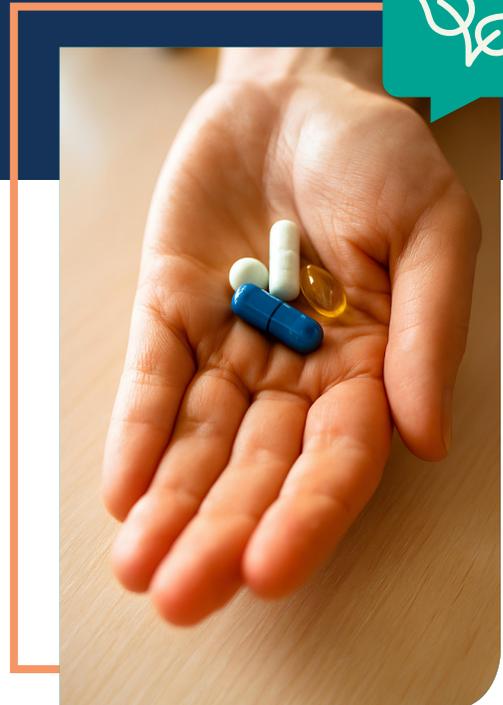


Understanding Herbal Supplements



Herbal supplements are products that are made from whole plants or plant parts. They come in many forms, including pills or capsules, teas and extracts, topical lotions, creams, gels, and fresh or dried plants.

While herbal medicine dates back thousands of years, taking herbal supplements is not always the safest or most effective way to prevent or treat illness. Use this guide to understand more about herbal supplements, precautions when choosing a supplement, and when to seek medical treatment.



What is the difference between herbal supplements and prescription or over-the-counter medications?

The main difference between herbal supplements and prescription or over-the-counter medications is how they are tested, manufactured, labeled, and regulated.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers herbal supplements to be food, not medication. While both food and medication are monitored for safety, medication undergoes rigorous research, development, and testing before it is available to people. Herbal supplements do not.

Many prescription and over-the-counter medications, like aspirin or codeine, are also derived from plant products, but they only contain pharmaceutical-grade ingredients and are regulated by the FDA for safety, quality, and efficacy. This is different from herbal supplements, which use a whole plant or plant parts and do not require standardized ingredients from batch to batch.

Do herbal supplements have proven benefits?

Herbal supplements are not regulated by the FDA. Therefore, any health claims associated with herbal supplements have not been evaluated, measured, or verified in FDA-approved clinical trials.

For example, an herbal supplement might say “improves heart health” instead of “lowers cholesterol” or “improves mood” instead of “treats depression.” These claims are often vague and potentially misleading because they have not been medically proven.

Are herbal supplements a replacement for vaccines?

No. Vaccines undergo rigorous research, development, and testing before they are available to the public. Herbal supplements do not. There are no herbal supplements that have been clinically proven to prevent serious infectious diseases.

Vaccines are the best way to protect yourself against many preventable, serious diseases and have a proven track record of reducing disease. Any health claims associated with herbal supplements – including the ability to “boost immunity” – have not been independently evaluated, measured, or verified.

Are herbal supplements safe?

While herbal supplements are technically “natural” remedies, they are not always safe to consume. Some herbs can cause serious harm or have a negative interaction with other medications you take. One example is St. John’s wort, which can both decrease the effectiveness of some prescription drugs and increase the risk of serious side effects.

If you are taking herbal supplements, it is important to share this information with a healthcare professional or research potential risks and side effects.

How do I learn more about herbal supplements?

Herbs at a Glance is a series of brief fact sheets from the National Institutes of Health that provides basic information about specific herbs or botanicals, potential side effects and precautions, and resources for more information.

In 2023, the FDA created an online directory of ingredients that may be used in herbal supplements. The directory includes safety announcements or warnings related to each ingredient.

What research should I do when choosing an herbal supplement?

Not all herbal supplements are created equally, and it is important to choose products from a reputable manufacturer. Some questions to consider when choosing an herbal supplement include:

- Will this supplement interact with any medication I am currently taking?
- Does the product label make vague, misleading, or inflated claims?
- Does the product label give clear information about the ingredients, side effects, directions, and precautions?
- Does the packaging have contact information so consumers can learn more about the product?
- Is the product tested and certified by a third party to ensure quality, safety, and effectiveness? The U.S. Department of Defense endorses several third-party certifiers, including USP and NSF Certified for Sport™.

If you are seeking a supplement to treat a disease that may require medication or to prevent a disease for which a vaccine is available, talk to a healthcare professional about additional options.



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