

a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

HCV & CAM: Herbs and Dietary Supplements: Making Safer and Wiser Choices

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In May 2004, the National Institutes of Health National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) conducted a large survey about the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the U.S. The results revealed that 62% of adults in this country use CAM. Prayer and “natural products” were the most frequently reported practices. When prayer and natural products were removed from the survey, that number dropped to 36%.

Women were more likely to use CAM than men were. The higher the education the more likely CAM was practiced. People used CAM for many reasons. The use of CAM along with conventional medical treatment was the most common approach. Some thought, “it would be interesting to try.” CAM was chosen when conventional medical treatment did not work. Other reasons commonly given included cost, availability, less side effects, the attraction to “natural” versus manufactured, cultural practice, and recommendation by others.

According to NCCAM, no CAM treatment has been proven safe and effective for treating HCV. In order for a treatment to be effective, according to the common definition, the treatment should bring about “the complete and sustained elimination of HCV virus.” However, there are other reasons to consider CAM. One reason is to manage symptoms and side effects. Another goal is to reduce inflammation. Some people also need to feel they are doing something rather than nothing.

The following groups of people should avoid the use of herbs unless otherwise ordered by their medical provider:

- Pregnant and nursing women
- Infants
- Organ transplant recipients
- Those with decompensated liver cirrhosis
- Anyone with a serious medical condition
- Those scheduled to have a medical or dental procedure who may have a bleeding risk or involve anesthesia

Note: There is virtually no safety information about HCV treatment and the use of supplements.

More clinical research needs to be conducted in this area. However, with or without science, herbs and other supplements have been around for centuries and people are unlikely to avoid them just because of insufficient scientific evidence. If you are interested in supplements, here is some information on how to make safer and wiser choices:

- Regardless of the choices you make, see your medical provider on a regular basis.
- Discuss herb and supplement use with your provider. Identify all the herbs and supplements you take, even if you think your provider might disapprove. Drugs and supplements can interact with each other as well as with other health conditions, so it is important to have the whole picture.
- Tell your provider if you have recently stopped taking

a supplement since this may alter your lab results.

- Some herbs prolong bleeding times or interfere with anesthetics. Stop all herb use at least 1 week prior to any medical or dental procedure. Tell your medical provider, surgeon, and anesthesiologist about any herbs you are using, particularly if the procedure occurs before you have sufficient time to observe this “wash-out” period.
- Assess your overall health. If you smoke, drink alcohol, and have other unhealthy habits, do not expect herbs to offset the potential damage these habits can cause. Adopting healthy habits will provide far more benefit than any herb can possibly give.
- Supplements are not a substitute for medical treatment.
- Apply the same commonsense approach and standards to herbs as you would to any drug. If you are reluctant to take any prescription or over-the counter drug, be just as reluctant to take an herb.
- Before you take an herb or supplement, find out if it is compatible with other drugs or supplements you are taking. Verify that the supplement is not contraindicated for any other condition you may have.
- Take extra precautions if you have a history of allergies. Botanical products can cause allergic reactions.
- Try to take herbs one at a time and not in a blended formulation. Combination herb products often provide insufficient quantities to be effective. Taking herbs one at a time will help you determine effectiveness and will be helpful if you have a negative reaction.
- Be informed and be sure your information is current.
- Supplements are not a substitute for good nutrition.
- Assess your total diet. A supplement may not be necessary if you eat foods that provide that supplement. Avoid overdosing yourself.
- Follow the label’s dosage recommendations. More is not better.
- Know your source. Herbs may be contaminated. Before ingesting anything, ask yourself what you know about what you are about to take.

- Choose herbs and supplements that are standardized.¹
- Herbs vary in quality. Independent testing has revealed contamination and poor quality formulations. Buy products that submit to voluntary self-regulation.²
- Natural does not equal healthy or safe. Strychnine and snake venom are natural but not healthy.
- Keep supplements out of children’s reach.
- Do not be swayed by bargain prices. Herbs are not all equal.
- Check the expiration date on the container.
- Store supplements away from sun, heat, extreme cold, or moisture.
- Take supplements with a full glass of water, unless directed otherwise.
- Unless directed otherwise, do not break, chew, or crush supplements, especially long-acting ones.
- Know if your supplement should be taken with food or without.
- Do not rely on the health food store staff for health care information. Although they may be helpful, remember that salespeople are usually not licensed to practice medicine. Do not treat your condition on the advice of a salesperson.
- Be skeptical. Claims made by the product manufacturer or seller may vastly differ from independent evidence-based research.
- Do not be swayed by personal testimonies. Although individuals may benefit from botanical use, the notion that “one size fits all” does not apply in medicine.
- Do not be influenced by the latest supplement to make headlines. Dietary supplements can be compared to cars. When new models are introduced, sometimes it takes time before problems develop. A product that really has value will be around for a while.
- Herbs and supplements should not be given to children or taken by pregnant or nursing women without a physician’s approval. Older adults and those with various health conditions should exercise extra caution before taking non-prescribed supplements. Herbs should never be used by people with decompensated cirrhosis.

- Some botanical products are sold in alcohol-based tinctures. Those taking disulfirman (Antabuse) or metronidazole (Flagyl) should avoid these formulations. Recovering alcoholics may also want to select non-alcohol-based formulations.

- Report any adverse reactions to herbs or supplements to your medical provider. You or your provider can also report reactions to the FDA's monitoring program, Medwatch at 800-322-1088 or www.fda.gov/medwatch.

¹Standardization indicates how much of the active ingredients are in an herbal product. This enables the consumer to know what "dose" to use.

²Supplements that meet any standards shows the manufacturers put extra effort into their product. There are many insignias, designations and "seals of approval." Some are: The United States Pharmacopeia (USP- NF), NSF, and ConsumerLab.com (CL). Standards have also been set by the British Herbal Compendium, the World Health Organization, the American Herbal Pharmacopeia, the American Herbal Products Association and others. Products that followed GMP - "good manufacturing practices" suggests more effort went into manufacturing.

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