

Using Herbs

Herbs are also called herbals, herbal therapy and dietary supplements. They are natural products often made from plants. People eat or drink these products to try to improve their health. How well herbs work is not known.

What You Need to Know

- **Tell your doctors, nurses, pharmacist and dietitian which herbs you are taking. Talk to them before starting new ones.**
- Herbs are not regulated, tested or controlled like medicines in the United States.
- Ingredients, dose and effects of the same herb may vary. Herbs can contain items that are not listed on the label. Dangerous things like lead, mercury, and arsenic have been found in herbs.
- You do not need a prescription from a doctor to buy them.
- Herbs can be very expensive.
- Herbs come in their natural state of leaves, bark, fruit, stems or flowers. Others are made into pills or liquids. Herbs may not be safe even from natural sources.
- Herbs may make you feel better, but they can effect your treatment. For example:
 - ▶ Ginkgo biloba may cause bleeding.
 - ▶ Kava may increase the effect of sleeping and relaxation medicine.
- Some people have allergies to herbs.
- Herbs are not tested on children or pregnant women and can cause miscarriages.

If you are taking or planning to take any herbs:

- **Talk to your doctor before starting a new herb.**
- Read the labels carefully. Look for the name of the herb and the ingredients.
- Start with a low dose. Then slowly increase the dose to the recommended level.
- Take only one new herb at a time. Wait at least 24 hours before starting another one. This will help if you find the cause of an allergy or side effect.
- Stop taking any herbal right away if you have a fast beating heart, shortness of breath, nausea or vomiting, mild or severe itching, or bleeding. **Go the Emergency Room or call your doctor.**
- Stop taking it if you have not seen results in a few weeks.