LIVING WELL

The Hidden Risk in Your Herbal Remedy

Before you mix an herbal product with a prescription drug, here is what the evidence can-and cannot-tell you.

The extra bottle in the cupboard

You have a prescription that matters and an herbal product that seems gentle. Perhaps it is a tea, capsule, powder or extract. You are not replacing your medicine. You are simply adding something that promises relief, balance or a little more control. The combination can feel too ordinary to mention at your next appointment.

That is the moment worth slowing down. Some herbs can interact with prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Herbal medicines also do not have to undergo the testing required of drugs, and products described as "natural" are not automatically safe. Comfrey and ephedra are among the herbs that can cause serious harm.

Natural is not a safety category. A plant can have therapeutic properties, which is precisely why it may not sit quietly beside another active product. The important question is not whether an herb came from the ground. It is what happens when that herb, your medicine and your body meet.

This does not mean every combination is dangerous. It means the word "herbal" cannot answer the safety question for you. The name of the herb matters. So does the medicine. And sometimes the available research still cannot tell you with confidence what their combination will do.

Two products, one body

A 2022 systematic literature review mapped reported interactions between commonly used herbs and conventional drugs in the Indian market. It found interaction patterns involving several drug categories, including antibiotics, oral medicines that lower blood sugar and anticonvulsants. The authors stressed that their information was not absolute and that the subject needed more detailed study.

The review also found both activation and inhibition involving CYP450 enzymes, components of human metabolism. Many conventional medicines are substrates, inhibitors or inducers of these enzymes, so an herb that interacts with the same system may also interact with a

medicine taken alongside it. That is a plausible route to a problem, not a prediction about every herb or every prescription.

Some interactions in that review were categorized as synergistic, while others elsewhere in the mapped literature could be antagonistic. Those terms should not be mistaken for a consumer verdict of "helpful" or "harmful." What matters to you is that the combined effect may not be the effect expected from either product alone-and the review does not provide a simple, universal list of safe pairings.

Just as importantly, the authors said studies finding no interaction matter too. The evidence is not a license to assume that all herbs clash with all drugs. But silence is not proof of compatibility either, especially when the precise herb, preparation and medicine you use have not been studied together.

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Evidence rarely travels as a bundle

An herb may look promising for one condition and still be an uncertain companion to your prescription. A 2025 review of herbal therapies for psoriasis included 20 randomized controlled trials involving 1,115 people. Mahonia aquifolium and indigo naturalis showed promise in reducing psoriasis severity, while other results were mixed. Risk of bias varied, and the reviewers said more research was needed on both effectiveness and safety.

A 2024 review of herbal medicines for Hashimoto's thyroiditis reached a similarly guarded conclusion. It included 16 trials and found preliminary evidence that some formulas might reduce thyroid antibody levels and improve reported symptoms without affecting thyroid function. No serious adverse events were reported, but the authors said the findings still required confirmation with higher-quality evidence.

Even apparently encouraging findings do not settle the interaction question. A trial asking whether an herbal preparation helps psoriasis or Hashimoto's thyroiditis is not automatically designed to establish whether that preparation can be safely combined with every prescription a reader might take. Evidence about benefit and evidence about compatibility are connected, but they are not interchangeable.

Traditional Chinese herbal products illustrate another layer of uncertainty. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health says studies across a range of conditions have produced mixed results, with many studies too poor in quality to support firm conclusions. That is not the same as proving the products do nothing. It means certainty has run ahead of the research whenever a claim sounds definitive.

The bottle may not be the whole story

Your decision is not only about the herb named on the front of a product. NCCIH reports that some Chinese herbal products have contained undeclared plant or animal material, conventional drugs, heavy metals, pesticides, microorganisms or sulfites. Manufacturing mistakes have also substituted one herb for another, sometimes with serious consequences.

Reported contaminants have included the blood thinner warfarin, the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, and metals such as arsenic, lead and cadmium. Some sulfites may cause asthma or severe allergic reactions, while incorrect herbs have caused organ damage. These findings do not establish that every product is contaminated. They do show why a familiar plant name alone cannot guarantee what you are taking.

This makes the conversation with your health care provider more concrete. Bring the exact product information rather than mentioning only that you use "something herbal." Tell your provider about every herbal medicine you take, and give all providers a full picture of the complementary approaches you use so your care can be coordinated safely.

Reliable information should be specific to the herb, too. NCCIH's Herbs at a Glance fact sheets cover individual botanicals, including what the science says, possible side effects and cautions. That kind of product-by-product checking is more useful than treating herbal medicine as one uniform category.

Some situations leave less room for guessing

The stakes rise when you are managing a serious illness. People with cancer may use complementary approaches to cope with treatment effects, ease worry or feel more involved in their care. Yet some products may interact with cancer medicines, and researchers often do not know how safe particular approaches are or how well they work.

A 2018 review of herbs for anxiety and depression deliberately excluded herbs already known to have potential interactions with cancer treatments. It examined 100 articles covering 38 botanicals and found encouraging signals for several herbs, but called for larger, better-designed trials before recommending them, including for people with cancer. That exclusion itself is a useful reminder: evidence of possible benefit does not erase interaction concerns.

If you have cancer, another health condition, or a prescription you depend on, adding an herb stops being a casual lifestyle experiment. Discuss complementary products with your health care provider rather than using them to replace or delay conventional care. Pregnancy, nursing

and giving an herbal product to a child also warrant particular care and consultation.

For the next week, make one small change: put every herbal tea, capsule, powder and extract you use on the same list as your prescription and over-the-counter medicines. Take the list-and the exact product details-to your pharmacist or health care provider before adding, stopping or swapping anything. You do not need to reject herbs. You need to stop making them invisible.

Where this comes from

- Herbal Medicine

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/herbalmedicine.html
- Cancer Alternative Therapies

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/canceralternativetherapies.html
- Herbs at a Glance | NCCIH

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