

Using medicines, herbal medicines and vitamin preparations wisely

Besides using drugs prescribed by a doctor or bought over the counter from a chemist, many people take herbal medicines suggested by a herbalist, natural therapist or other practitioner. They may also hear about a herbal remedy or a vitamin or mineral supplement and try it for themselves. But whatever type of medicine you use, the advice is the same: be sure you know how to use it wisely. It's also important to let your family doctor and other practitioners know about *all* the medicines you take, whether they're herbal medicines or medicines prescribed by a doctor. If you find it hard to remember the names of your other medicines, take them with you when you see the doctor, herbalist or other practitioner. Consulting the same doctor / practitioner regularly makes it easier for him or her to know what medications you take.

What should you know before taking any medicine?

Used properly, medicines can improve your health, especially if they're combined with a healthy diet and lifestyle. But with any type of medicine (as well as with some vitamin and mineral supplements) there's always a risk of unwanted effects, especially:

- if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, or breastfeeding
- if you drink alcohol
- if you have kidney, liver or serious stomach problems
- if you are allergic to any of the substances in the medicines
- if you don't take the medicine as directed
- if you take a combination of prescribed medications and herbal medicines that interact with each other
- if you use a medicine prescribed for someone else. Just because a particular medicine helped someone else, doesn't mean it's suitable for you. It may not work or may be harmful. This is why it's important not to give your medicines to other people.

What should you ask your doctor, pharmacist, herbalist or other practitioner about taking medication or using herbal medicine?

- What are the side effects of this medicine?
- Will it interact with other medicines I'm taking?
- How often should I take it?
- How long should I take it for?
- Should I take it with meals or on an empty stomach?
- What if I miss a dose?
- Is there anything I should avoid when taking this medicine, eg driving, or being in the sun?

- Could it make me unsteady on my feet or cause drowsiness? Some commonly prescribed medicines can have this effect so it's especially important to ask this question if you're elderly.

Will my doctor object if I say I am using herbal medicine or taking vitamin supplements?

- Most doctors realise that many people use herbal medicine and vitamin preparations, and accept that this is their choice. But they need to know about any medicine you take, whether it's prescribed by another doctor, or other practitioner, or bought from a chemist, supermarket, health food store, herbalist or a store selling herbal medicines. This is because both pharmaceutical drugs and herbal medicine (and some vitamin and mineral supplements) can sometimes interact with each other and cause problems, or make one of the medicines less effective.

What should I know about herbal medicines?

- Make sure you know how to use them, and use them only as directed.
- Unlike pharmaceutical drugs, herbal medicine can vary considerably in strength. This is because these medicines are made from plants – and plant ingredients can vary in potency according to where they are grown, for instance.
- If you want to use herbal medicine it may be better to consult a reputable herbalist who can advise you about the best medicine and dosage for your particular problem. This may be more helpful than 'prescribing' these medicines for yourself. There are also some doctors who have an interest in prescribing traditional medicines as well as prescription drugs.

What's the best way to store medicines?

Keep them in their original containers and store in a cool, dry place, out of reach of children.

What if I'm worried about side effects, or feel the medicine isn't working?

See your doctor, herbalist or other practitioner as soon as possible.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.