



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Complementary Medicines

In Australia, traditional, herbal, natural and alternative medicines and remedies are called ‘complementary medicines’. Many people believe complementary medicines are harmless, but they can interact with other medicines and they can cause adverse effects.

What are complementary medicines?

Complementary medicines may be of herbal or non-herbal origin and may be natural or synthetic products. In complementary medicine, ‘herb’ means any part of a plant traditionally used as medicine and may include the leaf, flower, stem, root, fruit or bark of the plant. Aromatherapy products, vitamins, minerals and nutritional supplements are also considered to be complementary medicines.

Some complementary medicines are made or supplied by naturopaths, homeopaths, herbalists and other therapists, and some can be purchased from pharmacies and other shops.

Are they effective?

All complementary medicines marketed in Australia must meet government standards for quality and safety, but their effectiveness does not currently have to be scientifically proven. Complementary medicines may contain ingredients which have been used as traditional remedies for a long time, but in many cases there is very little scientific evidence to support their use. Consequently, the claims that can be made about complementary medicines are often limited and phrases like ‘may relieve’, ‘may prevent’ or ‘may promote’ are commonly used to describe their benefits.

Using complementary medicines safely

Complementary medicines need to be treated with the same care and respect as other medicines.

Many complementary medicines can cause adverse effects and some may interact and interfere with other medicines.



Before using a complementary medicine, consult a doctor or pharmacist if you are:

- Using any other medicine, either prescribed by a doctor or purchased from a pharmacy or elsewhere
- Using any other complementary medicines including herbs or supplements
- Sensitive or allergic to any medicine
- Pregnant or planning to become pregnant
- Breast feeding
- Planning to have surgery.

For more information

HEALTHInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

‘Medimate’ medicines information brochure – from your pharmacist or website www.medimate.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Important

- Always include all complementary medicines on your medicines list and make sure your doctor and pharmacist know you are taking them.
- Do not stop a prescribed medicine and use a complementary medicine instead – check with your doctor first.
- If you want to try a complementary medicine in addition to prescribed or other medicine – check with your doctor or pharmacist first.
- Some complementary medicines are not safe to take during pregnancy or whilst breast feeding – check with your doctor, pharmacist and naturopath/herbalist.
- Some complementary medicines should be stopped at least one week prior to surgery – check with your doctor, pharmacist and naturopath/herbalist.
- Do not give a complementary medicine to a child, unless the product information states it is safe for children and gives a children's dose.
- Like all medicines, complementary medicines must be stored out of the reach of children.

Some examples of complementary medicines, reported uses and current evidence for use:

Complementary medicine	Some reported uses	Scientific evidence for use	Some known precautions
Black Cohosh	Premenstrual syndrome, dysmenorrhoea, menopausal symptoms	Some relief of menopausal symptoms	Interacts with some medicines, avoid in certain medical conditions; risk of liver damage
Cranberry	Preventing urinary tract infection, reducing urinary odour	Can prevent urinary tract infection	Interacts with some medicines (e.g., warfarin)
Chondroitin	Osteoarthritis, eye lubrication, heart disease, osteoporosis, cancer	Conflicting evidence of benefit in osteoarthritis; can act as an eye lubricant during eye surgery	Some products derived from shark cartilage. May increase risk of bleeding
Echinacea	Wound healing, treating & preventing colds & chronic respiratory tract infection	No conclusive evidence of benefit	May cause allergy reactions; avoid in certain medical conditions; may interact with some medicines; cease use 10 days prior to surgery
Evening Primrose Oil	Eczema, premenstrual syndrome, psoriasis, breast cancer, mastalgia, ADHD, schizophrenia	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines
Fish Oil (contains omega-3 fatty acids)	Heart & blood vessel disease, rheumatoid arthritis, depression, asthma, dermatitis, schizophrenia, diabetes, ADHD	Can lower blood triglycerides; can reduce risk of heart attack, stroke & death in cardiovascular disease; can reduce joint stiffness & tenderness in RA; May be of benefit in ADHD	May increase risk of bleeding
Ginger	Nausea & vomiting	Can relieve nausea & vomiting with pregnancy. May relieve sea sickness	May increase risk of bleeding
Ginkgo	Dementia, tinnitus, preventing macular degeneration, intermittent claudication	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines; may increase risk of bleeding
Ginseng	Enhancing mental & physical performance, boosting immune system, type 2 diabetes, herpes simplex type 2 infection, chronic fatigue syndrome, heart disease	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
Glucosamine	Osteoarthritis, back pain, glaucoma	Conflicting evidence of benefit in osteoarthritis	Some products derived from shellfish; may interact with some medicines; use with caution in renal impairment
Guarana (contains caffeine)	Psychostimulant promoting mental alertness, weight loss aid	Some evidence of improved task performance	High doses may cause caffeine side effects and withdrawal effects. Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
Red Clover (contains phyto-oestrogens)	Menopausal symptoms, arterial stiffness, osteoporosis, eczema, psoriasis, lowering cholesterol, prostate problems	Some evidence of improved arterial blood flow & increased bone mineral density	Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
Soy (contains phyto-oestrogens)	Menopausal symptoms, lowering cholesterol, osteoporosis, prostate cancer	Dietary soy can help hot flushes & lower cholesterol	Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
St. John's Wort	Depression, menopausal mood symptoms, eczema	Can improve mild to moderate depression and menopausal mood symptoms	Interacts with many medicines (e.g., antidepressants, contraceptive pills, warfarin); cease at least 10 days prior to surgery
Valerian	Sedative for sleeping problems and anxiety	Some evidence of positive effect on sleep	Avoid in certain medical conditions

Ask a pharmacist for advice before using complementary medicines

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