Warning: Natural Selection

The dirt on herbs

September 1, 2000 By Michael Onstott

Herb: Echinacea
Immune stimulant used for short-term treatment of colds, flu, bacterial infections, mouth inflammation, wounds and burns.
Cautions/ Side Effects: PWAs should not use for more than three weeks at a time; long-term use may overstimulate the immune system. Should not be used by pregnant women or people with tuberculosis
Drug Interactions: May interfere with immune-suppressant and steroid drugs (such as cyclosporin and corticosteroids). May enhance the efficacy of econazole (used topically for vaginal yeast infections).

Herb: Ephedra (Ma Huang)
Potent nervous-system stimulant and decongestant used for coughs, bronchitis, asthma and weight loss.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Use with extreme caution. Common side effects include headache, irritability, restlessness and nausea. Can cause high blood pressure, heart rhythm disorders and sudden heart failure. Can be addictive. Do not take during pregnancy.
Drug Interactions: Harmful interactions with many drugs, including corticosteroids, caffeine (and other stimulants), decongestants, MAO inhibitor antidepressants (such as phenelzine) and heart medications (such as halathone).

Herb: Garlic
Used for fungal and bacterial infections, high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol and hardening of the arteries, also as blood thinner.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Generally safe, but can cause stomach inflammation and nausea, allergic reactions, skin burns, bad breath and postoperative bleeding. Not to be used while nursing.
Drug Interactions: May increase the risk of bleeding when used with blood-thinning meds such as Coumadin, heparin and aspirin. Diabetics may require adjustment of insulin dose.

Herb: Ginger
Used to treat colds, appetite loss, motion sickness, nausea and vomiting, also as blood thinner.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Pregnant women, people taking blood-thinning drugs, and those with

bleeding disorders, ulcers or gallstones should avoid taking large amounts.
Drug Interactions: May increase the risk of bleeding when used with blood-thinning meds. Reduces nausea caused by cancer chemotherapy.

Herb: Ginkgo Biloba
Used for improving circulation to the brain and extremities, and for treating memory loss, tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and erectile dysfunction, also as blood thinner.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Allergic reactions affecting the skin and gastrointestinal tract are rare. Should be avoided by people with risk factors for brain hemorrhage.
Drug Interactions: May increase the risk of bleeding when used with blood-thinning meds. Reverses sexual dysfunction linked to such antidepressants as Prozac and Zoloft.

Herb: Ginseng (Panax*)
Herbal tonic used to improve stamina and concentration, and to reduce fatigue. Long-term use among HIVers should be supervised by a licensed practitioner.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Side effects may include insomnia, nervousness and (in high doses) high blood pressure. Pregnant women and people with high blood pressure should avoid ginseng.
Drug Interactions: Use with MAO inhibitors not recommended—may result in mania symptoms. May reduce effect of the blood-thinner Coumadin. Diabetics may require adjustment of insulin dose. Use with caffeine may cause high blood pressure.

Herb: Goldenseal
Antibacterial herb used to treat acute parasitic and bacterial infections (in the intestines and eyes), flu, inflammation of the mucous membranes, wounds and gastric ulcers.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Extended use can lead to liver toxicity, digestive disorders, irritation of the gut, constipation and hallucination. Do not take during pregnancy. Overdoses can cause convulsions, difficulty with breathing and paralysis.
Drug Interactions: Reduces effect of the blood-thinner heparin. May interfere with the absorption of B vitamins.

Herb: Licorice extract
Generally used along with other herbs to treat chronic liver disease, coughs, sore throat, bronchitis, and gastric and peptic ulcers. (Don’t confuse with the pharmaceutical extract glycyrrhizin, whose side effects can be more severe.)
Cautions/ Side Effects: Should not be used for more than four to six weeks or in high doses without careful monitoring. Can cause potassium loss. Should not be taken by people with heart disease, low blood potassium, severe kidney insufficiency, diabetes or high blood pressure. Do not take during pregnancy.
Drug Interactions: Increases the toxicity of digitalis (drug for heart failure) and speeds up the heart rate when used with anti-arrhythmic heart meds. When combined with diuretics, laxatives or insulin, exacerbates potassium loss.Increases the effect of corticosteroids.

Herb: Milk Thistle (silymarin)
Used to treat liver damage and inflammation, and chronic hepatitis.

Cautions/ Side Effects: No health hazards or side effects are known. Allergic reactions are possible but unusual.
Drug Interactions: Helps prevent some types of liver damage associated with many meds.

Herb: St. John’s Wort (hypercium)
Internally used to treat mild to moderate depression and anxiety; externally for treating blunt injuries and burns.
Cautions/ Side Effects: Sensitivity to sunlight (sunburn and inflammation) and damage to reproductive cells may occur at high doses, especially with long-term use.
Drug Interactions: Interacts with many drugs. Significantly reduces blood levels of indinavir (Crixivan), Digoxin (a heart med) and contraceptives. May similarly affect other protease inhibitors and NNRTIs. May increase effect and toxicity of the SSRI class of antidepressants, such as Paxil.

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