



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. 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 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' or 'may prevent' 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 herbs or supplements
- Sensitive or allergic to any medicine
- Pregnant or planning to become pregnant
- Breast feeding
- Planning to have surgery.

For more information

Health/Insite – 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.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

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

Important

- 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.
- Always include all complementary medicines on your medicines list and make sure your doctor and pharmacist know you are taking them.
- 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, menopause	Some relief of menopausal symptoms	Interacts with some medicines, avoid in certain medical conditions; Risk of liver damage
Cranberry	Urinary tract infection, reduce urinary odour	Can prevent urinary tract infection	Interacts with some medicines (e.g., warfarin)
Chondroitin	Osteoarthritis, eye lubrication, heart disease, osteoporosis, cancer	Can relieve symptoms of osteoarthritis; can act as an eye lubricant during eye surgery	Some products derived from shark cartilage. May increase risk of bleeding
Echinacea	Wound healing, treatment & prevention of colds & chronic respiratory tract infection		May cause allergy reactions; avoid in certain medical conditions; may interact with some medicines
Evening Primrose Oil	Dermatitis, premenstrual syndrome, psoriasis, mastalgia, ADHD, schizophrenia		Interacts with some medicines
Fish Oil (contains omega-3 fatty acids)	Heart & blood vessel disease, rheumatoid arthritis, depression, asthma, dermatitis, schizophrenia, cancer, diabetes	Can lower triglycerides; can reduce risk of heart attack & stroke in cardiovascular disease; can reduce joint stiffness & tenderness in RA;	May increase risk of bleeding
Ginger	Nausea & vomiting	Can relieve nausea & vomiting of pregnancy	May increase risk of bleeding
Ginkgo	Cerebral insufficiency, dementia, tinnitus, eye problems, intermittent claudication	Some evidence of benefit in cerebral insufficiency	Interacts with some medicines; May increase risk of bleeding
Ginseng	Enhance mental & physical performance, boost immune system, menopause, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, lung disease		Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
Glucosamine	Osteoarthritis or other joint disorders	Can relieve symptoms & slow progression of mild to moderate osteoarthritis	Some products derived from shellfish; May interact with some medicines
Guarana (contains caffeine)	CNS stimulant promotes mental alertness, weight loss aid	Some evidence of improved task performance	
Red Clover (contains phyto-oestrogens)	Menopause, eczema, psoriasis, osteoporosis, lower cholesterol, whooping cough, prostate problems, cancer	Some evidence of improved arterial blood flow & increased bone mineral density	Interacts with some medicines; avoid in certain medical conditions
Soy (contains phyto-oestrogens)	Menopause, lowering cholesterol, osteoporosis, cancer, diabetes	Dietary soy may help hot flushes, post-menopausal osteoporosis & cholesterol	Avoid in certain medical conditions
St. John's Wort	Depression, menopause, dermatitis	Can improve mild to moderate depression	Interacts with many medicines (e.g., antidepressants, contraceptive pills, warfarin)
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

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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