

Natural cures

A new trend in health care

By LISA HOGAN

Herbal remedies and dietary supplements are becoming the new trend in health care, replacing or supplementing everything from food to prescription medicine. There are a wide variety of these remedies for whatever ails you, whether you are suffering from mild fatigue, stress, or low concentration levels.

Lisa Gallant is a pharmacist at Zellers pharmacy in Charlottetown.

"Some of the oldest poisons are herbs, [so] you have to be careful. They are not food and have to be respected." Gallant believes that many herbs are basically drugs, and says that some are similar to prescription medicines, but that they are simply a milder form.

One example of an herb that works much like a prescription drug is the popular St. John's Wort, used for mild depression, fatigue, nervous tension and insomnia. This herb has often been compared to antidepressant drugs, particularly the class known as SSRI's (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors), which include fluoxetine hydrochloride, better known as Prozac. Gallant says that St. John's Wort is similar to these antidepressants and that they do work for mild depression, but warns that anyone suffering from severe depression should not rely on an herbal remedy.

A more enthusiastic view on natural remedies comes from many who are involved with natural health remedies.

One manager of a natural foods and health centre on PEI sees herbs more as food than as drugs, although she does believe that you can get too much of a good thing. "I don't believe that herbs are dangerous, as long as they are taken in moderation.... Prescription drugs are far more dangerous."

Some herbs in particular that have been found to be useful include Ginkgo Biloba and Ginseng.

Sharon Horne, owner of Sharon's Health Food Store in Bloomfield, says that Ginkgo Biloba is an antioxidant. "It improves blood circulation and can increase concentration. Ginseng is more for energy, especially Korean ginseng, and Siberian ginseng is great for stress."

Besides herbs used for depression, stress, energy, and mental clarity, certain ones can also be used for aiding the immune system. Gallant says that the herb Echinacea can be helpful in this regard.

"Echinacea is not a miracle cure, but studies do suggest that it can help to cut colds a couple of days short," she says. Gallant continued that Echinacea should only be taken for short periods of time, as it has been shown to actually lessen immune function if taken on a continual basis.

Although herbal medicines can be useful for a variety of things, individuals should make sure that the reason for any health problem is not due to poor diet and a lack of necessary nutrients before taking them.

Horne maintains that the emphasis should be on food and the vitamins and minerals it contains rather than on herbs. "Herbs can be useful, but I would look more to natural remedies such as vitamin E."

Horne believes that the necessary B vitamins and the emulsifier lecithin can work better than St. John's Wort for depression. For fatigue, she recommends kelp, a type of seaweed that contains many necessary vitamins and minerals including iron, from which a deficiency in can result in fatigue.

Horne believes that it is "very important" to take a basic multi supplement every day that consists of essential vitamins and minerals, especially vitamin C and the minerals. "We do not get enough nutrients anymore from food and so it is important to supplement our diet. It's good to use a brand without arsenic and other preservatives used to increase the shelf life."

If you want to boost your energy level, concentration and immune functioning, or relieve mild depression or stress, herbs can be very helpful. However, be aware of what you are taking, and learn how it works, how it should be taken, what any possible side effects are, and any precautions that should be taken. Simply because herbal remedies are natural does not mean that they should be taken carelessly.

Common herbs and vitamins for common ailments

For Relief of:

Stress

Siberian Ginseng
B Complex and vitamin C

Depression

St. John's Wort
B Complex and Lecithin

Insomnia

St. John's Wort
Ginseng
Peppermint

Nervous Tension

St. John's Wort
Chamomile
Peppermint

Fatigue

St. John's Wort

Ginseng
Astragalus

Stomach Problems

Comfrey
Chamomile
Blessed Thistle
Aloe Vera
Juniper

Colds

Echinacea
Astragalus
Pennyroyal
Suma
Germanium

Pain

Peppermint
(headaches and cramps)
Chamomile
(headaches and migraine)

Feverfew (migraine)

Hangover

B Complex
Choline and Inositol
Water

PMS

Evening Pimrose Oil
Peppermint
Dong Quai

To Improve:

Concentration

Ginkgo Biloba

Immunity

Echinacea