

Herbal Products

This sheet is about using herbal products in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available published literature. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What are herbal products?

Herbal products are considered dietary supplements. They are not the same as medication. In the United States, dietary supplements cannot be sold for the purposes of treating, diagnosing, preventing, or curing disease. They come in many forms, such as teas, infusions, caplets, dried extracts, and tinctures.

Herbal products could contain high amounts of active compounds that can be of concern in pregnancy or while breastfeeding. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not check herbal products for safety and effectiveness before they are sold in stores or online. This means very few herbal products have scientific proof that they work at all or in the way stated on the product label. Many herbal supplements have not been evaluated for use in pregnancy or breastfeeding.

Often patients forget to tell their healthcare provider(s) that they use herbal products, but it is important to let all of your healthcare providers know about all over-the-counter products that you use and any other exposures you have.

Herbs can also be used in food preparation. Herbs used in preparing food would not be expected to be of concern when used in moderation.

Are herbal products different from using prescription or over-the-counter medications?

Yes. The FDA does not check herbal products for safety and effectiveness before they are sold in stores or online. Most have not been well-studied regarding their safety and ability to work as they are advertised. Also, there are no standards for ingredients and strength. Be mindful of product claims such as “works better than [a prescription drug],” “totally safe,” or has “no side effects.” Be aware that the term “natural” does not mean safe.

Levels of active ingredients in herbal preparations will depend on the growing and harvesting conditions, plant parts used (e.g. root, stem, flower, and/or bark), and the way they are made into supplements.

Some herbal products might contain contaminants such as metals (lead, arsenic, mercury), pesticides, other chemicals, or microorganisms (e.g. fungi or bacteria). They may even contain other ingredients not listed on the label. Tinctures and liquid products can contain alcohol. Alcohol should be avoided in pregnancy.

Dangerous side effects have been reported for some herbal products. Many herbal products can also affect how prescribed medications or anesthesia work. Be sure to ask your healthcare provider if the supplement you are considering would be helpful for you before starting the use of any herbal products.

Some herbal products have been shown to have high levels of lead. Lead can be stored in our bones. Your healthcare provider can test your lead level before pregnancy. If needed, a treatment plan to reduce levels of lead in your body can be discussed.

I take herbal products. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Some herbal supplements have been shown to cause changes in hormones that are important for getting pregnant. Other products have been suggested to increase the chances of getting pregnant. However, their safety has not been proven.

I just found out that I am pregnant, should I stop using herbal products?

Talk to your healthcare provider about all the products you use. Most herbal products have not been well studied during pregnancy, so it may not be known how they might affect a pregnancy. A woman who is pregnant or planning a pregnancy may wish to consider other therapies for which more information is available.

Does taking herbal products increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Some products have been shown

to cause hormone imbalance or uterine contractions that could lead to pregnancy loss.

Does taking herbal products increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. There is limited information on the use of most herbal products during pregnancy. Products that contain more than 1 ingredient are very hard to study for how they could affect a pregnancy. There is concern about interactions between ingredients in these products and other medications a woman may be taking, and concern over harmful substances not noted on the label.

Does taking herbal products in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

Some products have been shown to bring on labor or to cause pregnancy loss, hormone imbalance, or uterine contractions. Read the label on the product and discuss each ingredient with your healthcare provider.

Does taking herbal products in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Many herbal products have not been studied for possible long-term effects on the developing baby. Therefore, it is not known if there is or is not any increased chance of long-term problems in behavior or learning for the baby.

Breastfeeding while taking herbal products:

There is very little information on the use of herbal products while nursing an infant. Read the label on the product and discuss each ingredient with your healthcare provider. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider for all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man takes herbal products, could it affect fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some herbal products might make it more difficult for a man to get a woman pregnant. All herbal product ingredients should be looked at carefully before using. In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Please click [here](#) for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://mothertobaby.org).

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