Herbal Products

This sheet is about using herbal products in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available research studies. 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.

People often forget to tell their healthcare provider(s) that they use herbal products, but it is important to let all your healthcare providers know about all herbal products, supplements, and other over-the-counter products that you use.

Dangerous side effects have been reported for some herbal products. 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.

Herbs can also be used in food preparation. When used in moderation, herbs used in preparing food are not expected to be of concern.

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

Yes. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates herbal products differently than prescription medications. Very few herbal products have scientific proof that they work at all or in the way stated on the product label. 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.” Keep in mind that the term ‘natural’ doesn’t mean a product is free from harmful effects.

Many herbal supplements have not been evaluated for use in pregnancy or breastfeeding. Herbal products could contain high amounts of ingredients that can be of concern in pregnancy or while breastfeeding. Some herbal products might contain contaminants such as metals (lead, arsenic, mercury), pesticides, other chemicals, or microorganisms (e.g. fungi or bacteria). They might contain other ingredients not listed on the label. Tinctures and liquid products can contain alcohol. Alcohol should be avoided in pregnancy. 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.

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.

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

Most herbal products have not been well studied during pregnancy, so it might not be known how they could affect a pregnancy. A woman who is pregnant or planning a pregnancy should talk with their healthcare providers about their herbal products and why they are using them. There might be other therapies for which more information on using during pregnancy 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?

Birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like herbal products, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy.

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. Other concerns with using herbal products during pregnancy include interactions between herbal products and other medications and possible harmful substances in herbal products that are 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, changes in hormones, 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?

For many herbal products, studies have not been done to see if they can increase the chance of behavior or learning issues for the child.

Breastfeeding and herbal products:

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

If a man takes herbal products, could it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some herbal products might affect men's fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant). Herbal product ingredients should be looked at carefully before using. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors 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.

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