Herbal Products

This sheet is about using herbal products in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information 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 medications. In the United States, dietary supplements cannot be sold for the purposes of treating, diagnosing, preventing, or curing diseases. They come in many forms, such as teas, infusions, caplets, dried extracts, and tinctures.

Herbs can be used in preparing foods. Herbs used in preparing food would not be expected to be of concern when used in moderation. However, 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.

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

Yes. The Food and Drug Administration (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 and mercury), pesticides, other chemicals, or microorganisms (e.g. fungi or bacteria). They may even contain other products not listed on the label. Tinctures and liquid products can contain alcohol, which 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, or could cause interactions with other medications. Be sure to ask your healthcare provider if the supplement you are considering would be helpful for you before starting or changing the use of any herbal products.

Some herbal medications have been shown to have high levels of lead, which 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 important for getting pregnant. Other products have been suggested to increase the chances of getting pregnant, but their safety has not been proven. Each product’s ingredients should be looked at carefully.

**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 person who is pregnant or planning a pregnancy may wish to consider other therapies for which more information is available.

**Does taking herbal products cause miscarriage?**
Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Some products have been shown to cause pregnancy loss from hormone imbalance or uterine contractions that could lead to pregnancy loss. Each product’s ingredients should be looked at carefully.

**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. Information on products that contain multiple herb ingredients are very hard to study for safety. There is concern about interactions between ingredients in these products and other medications an individual 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, 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 on 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 using herbal products:**

There is very little information on 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 male takes herbal products, could it affect fertility (ability to get partner pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?**

Some herbal products might make it more difficult for a male to get a partner pregnant. All herbal product ingredients should be looked at carefully before using. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase the 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 to view references.