

Alternative Medicine and Herbal Drugs from a Clinical Point of View

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Abstract:

There is a history of herbal therapies in the treatment of dermatological and internal disorders for thousands of years in Europe and Asia. In former days alternative medicine based on this knowledge is becoming increasingly popular in the industrial countries. Alternative Medicine and herbal drugs are considered to be safe in use. They are supposed to have good effects and no undesired reactions. For some drugs and methods an effect is known, but some are neither known in effect nor in composition. Therefore standardisation of herbal preparations and investigation about their clinical use and efficacy is recommended. Further practitioners need more information about ingredients, the common drug interactions and side effects of herbal remedies.

Green tea extracts have been reported to be beneficial in treating UV-induced photodamage. Tannins are used in the treatment of acne because of their natural astringent properties. Aloe vera is useful for wound healing. Capsaicin, the main ingredient of cayenne pepper, is effective in the treatment of psoriasis. German camomile shows positive effects in the treatment of skin inflammation and forms of dermatitis.

Although positive reactions are reported, one has to keep in mind that virtually all herbal remedies can cause allergic reactions. Less often they can cause photosensitivity. Ayurvedic medicine sometimes contains arsenic and mercury in relevant amounts. Most of the adverse effects reported are of mild to moderate severity and of transient nature. But practitioners should be aware that these remedies can cause adverse effects which may be serious. The knowledge about the mechanisms of effect and the specific indications of herbal remedies will be of great benefit for the patients.

1. Desire for “the natural way”

Americans are now spending billions of dollars per year for capsules, tablets, bulk herbs, and herbal teas. Although many of these items are consumed for their flavour, most are probably used for supposed medicinal qualities. Sales by multilevel distributors and pharmacies amount to hundreds of millions more for products that are obviously intended for self-medication.

Herbs are also marketed by naturopaths, acupuncturists, iridologists, chiropractors, and unlicensed herbalists, many of whom prescribe them for the entire gamut of health problems. Many such practitioners are not qualified to make appropriate medical diagnoses or to determine how the products they prescribe compare to proven drugs.

Herbal advocates like to point out that about half of today's medicines were derived from plants. (Digitalis, for example, was originally derived from leaves of the foxglove plant.) This statement is true but misleading. Drug products contain specified amounts of active ingredients. Herbs in their natural state can vary greatly from batch to batch and often contain chemicals that cause side effects but provide no benefit.

When potent natural substances are discovered, drug companies try to isolate and synthesise the active chemical in order to provide a reliable supply. They also attempt to make derivatives that are more potent, more predictable, and have fewer side effects. In the case of digitalis, derivatives provide a spectrum of speed and duration of action. Digitalis leaf is almost never used today because its effects are less predictable. Many herbs contain hundreds or even thousands of chemicals that have not been completely catalogued. Some of these chemicals may turn out to be useful as therapeutic agents, but others could well prove toxic.

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 included herbal products in its definition of “dietary supplements,” even though herbs have little or no nutritional value. (The bill was spearheaded by the health-food industry in order to weaken FDA regulation of its products.) Herbal or other botanical ingredients include processed or unprocessed plant parts (bark, leaves, flowers, fruits, and stems) as well as extracts and essential oils. They are available as teas, powders, tablets, capsules and elixirs, and may be marketed as single substances or combined with other herbs, vitamins, minerals, amino acids or non-nutrient ingredients. Products containing multiple herbal ingredients may produce adverse effects that are impossible to predict. A 1999 survey by Prevention magazine's found that 12% of herbal remedy users reported adverse reactions.