

Experts differ on effectiveness of herbal remedies

As the popularity of herbs grows, debate among medical professionals ensues about their efficacy

By Sarah Skidmore
Oregon Daily Emerald

Herbs can make you more alert, help you sleep and even help alleviate depression, herbal proponents contend. However, new research shows that herbs can also cause digestive problems, contribute to hypertension and in some cases do absolutely nothing.

The popularity of herbal remedies is increasing in the United States. According to the American Medical Association, more than one-third of Americans use herbs for health purposes and spend more than \$3.5 billion annually on them.

However, medical information and research about the efficacy and safety of herbs are only recently coming to light. While some herbs are meeting their claims, others are being proven unsafe and/or ineffective.

The medical field has shown mixed reactions toward the increasing popularity of this field of alternative medicine.

"I think in many ways the popularity is positive," said Dr. William Disher of the University Student Health Center. "Many of these are preventative, natural and readily available."

Some critics within the medical field include Dr. George Lundberg, editor of the Journal of

the American Medical Association. He made the following statement in the Nov. 11 editorial in the journal:

"There is no alternative medicine. There is only scientifically proven, evidence-based medicine supported by solid data or unproven medicine, for which scientific evidence is lacking."

Other critics of herbs are concerned about possible drug interactions, side effects and lack of regulations on herb productions.

"People might take things they think might help them but they won't or might even hurt them," said Katharine Skola, University student and peer health educator.

Lundberg said in his editorial, "Until solid evidence is available that demonstrates the safety, efficacy, and effectiveness of specific alternative medicine interventions, uncritical acceptance of untested and unproven alternative medicine therapies must stop."

Some medical professionals disagree.

"I do not think that the best evidence is always the result of rigid scientific study," Disher said. "Some of these herbs are effective as the result of 5,000 years of experience."

Students such as Teren Robbins, a junior political science major, agree. He began using herbal remedies, particularly teas, in college. He said he has noticed a quicker recovery time

For more information

- The National Institute for Health — Office of Alternative Medicine Clearinghouse: 1-888-644-6226
- American Medical Association: www.ama-assn.org
- "The German Commission E. Monographs" — a text of research done by the German Government on herbal medicine, recently translated to English for the first time

than he experienced before he used the herbs.

Part of the controversy is because herbs, although they are frequently referred to as alternative medicine, are not legally considered drugs.

Therefore, they are not regulated by the FDA. Proponents, such as herbalist Cherie Capps, director of the Center for Herbal Studies in Oregon, maintain that herbs meet a special need of patients.

"It fills the gap that there isn't an alternative for," she said. "In a lot of cases herbs can build up the body and prevent illness and if the body is sick, it can build up the body and help the body repair."

Despite the controversy, the popularity of herbs as medicinal treatments has skyrocketed.

A study of trends in alternative medicine by the American Medical Association listed herbal medicine as one of the fastest growing forms of alternative

medicine.

To increase patient safety, both proponents and critics agree that if a person chooses to use herbs, letting a primary physician know about any herbs being used, taking appropriate doses and using caution are crucial.

"My approach to herbs is that they are drugs and should be treated as such," Capps said.

At the University level, many students are now asking for information about herbal options, Disher said.

He estimated that the most commonly used herbs were echinacea, St. John's wort, valerian, ginseng and ginkgo biloba. Of these herbs, only ginseng and valerian were included in the FDA's list of 250 herbs that are "generally recognized as safe."

Echinacea is commonly used for the prevention and treatment of colds and for the healing of wounds. This is the most popular herb in the United States and grosses more than \$300 million in sales annually, according to the Archive of Family Medicine, a publication of the AMA. Two forms of echinacea, *E. angustifolia* and *E. purpurea* were proven no more effective than a placebo in the AMA's study. Additionally, use of echinacea beyond the duration of eight weeks could cause hepatotoxicity.

St. John's wort is an herb native to the Northwest that is commonly used as a treatment

for mild depression. In some documented cases, people have become intensely sensitive to sunlight as a result of excessive amounts of St. John's wort. As an anti-depressant, it has proven effective in most clinical trials.

Valerian is a root that is frequently used as a sleep aid. Trial runs have shown that it is an effective tool to create an improved quality of sleep. However, there has been a small percentage of reported cases of persons suffering from restlessness and palpitations from the herb.

Ginseng is touted as an energy booster and performance enhancer by many herb company producers. It is one of the more expensive herbs and is used by at least six million Americans, according to the AMA. Because of the widespread claims made about ginseng, the results are jumbled. However, the AMA did an analysis of 54 available ginseng products, and 85 percent were determined as "worthless" and contained no ginseng.

Ginkgo biloba, the last of the popular herbs, is used to increase memory and increase blood circulation and oxygenation. In a yearlong study, this herb was found to stabilize and improve the cognitive and social functioning of patients with dementia. In another trial, healthy geriatric patients showed better cognitive function after using ginkgo.

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Hult Center

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Dec 7th
Hult Center

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12:00pm - 3:00pm Sunday
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Thanksgiving Building Hours:

Nov. 25: Building closes at 5:00 with the exception of the lower side which closes at 9:00.

Nov. 29: Building remains closed, lower west side open from noon to 11:30pm.

HELP WANTED

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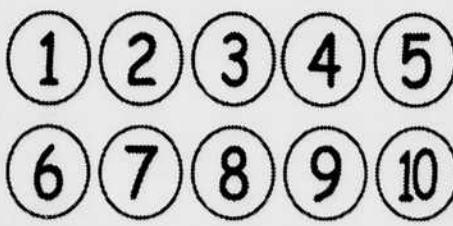
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