

CHAPTER II: HERBS AND OTHER DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

Sources of Information

The Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, which is part of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that has regulatory responsibility for supplements, publishes information for consumers and for professionals. They have a very nice document on their Web site called the “Savvy Supplement User” that you might like to visit. For our own part, the Office of Dietary Supplements at the NIH publishes a lot of information on our Web site. A lot of it is scientific information. In addition, we publish a series of fact sheets on the Web site, many of which are related to vitamins and minerals and were developed in collaboration with the Clinical Center, the clinical arm of the National Institutes of Health. But a series of them are underway, in collaboration with our partners in the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), on botanical and herbal supplements as well. NCCAM, for its own part, has a Web site that I am sure you know about, and the NIH as an organization also has a Web site that deals with ongoing clinical trials for a host of things. It’s not just dietary supplements; if you go to the Web site www.clinicaltrials.gov, you can get some indication of what ongoing studies are related, for example, to ginkgo and mental status or glucosamine and knee osteoarthritis. You can learn about trials that you might be interested in participating in, so this also gives you access to who to contact and whether or not they’re still enrolling patients.

I haven’t mentioned the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) before, but this is the other organization of the Federal government that has regulatory responsibility over dietary supplements. Although the FDA has a responsibility for labeling and for product ingredients when they have the responsibility for that at all, the FTC has the responsibility for advertising. So the FDA and the FTC often work together in developing strategies to improve the information that’s available for people so that if you’re trying to make some sense out of dietary supplements on the market, you can have access to information sources that are reliable.

There are also other sources of information that you should know about. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has a long-standing interest in nutrition-related issues. The Council for Responsible Nutrition is the trade association of the dietary supplement industry. If you haven't read Quackwatch recently, you might find it provocative at a minimum. I looked at it today, just checking to make sure that the Web site address was still the same, and they've got a feature this week on coral calcium, which is a dietary supplement ingredient that you might be interested in. Supplement Watch and the Alternative Medicine Foundation are other sources of information about dietary supplements. When it comes down to it, consumers probably do need more information than they've been given. I say probably only because I don't like to presume that you need something that I've got. That's not the point behind this discussion. I do think that consumers should be entitled to more information about dietary supplements, both the potential benefits, harms, and marketing tools that may get your dollars but may not get you much else. All of those are issues that you need to be thinking about, and I hope that you'll use your mind. You'll think about taking responsibility for you own health care, and as you do, also think about your responsibility for trying to get the most reliable information possible as you make choices.

The last message is that I do think that you should be doing this in consultation with some health professional. It could be your physician, pharmacist, acupuncturist, or a public health nurse, but you need to be sure that you're not the only person making some of these decisions.

I did mention to you that I'd comment on the issue about interactions between drugs and herbs. While there is not an enormous amount of information out there about this, there are some very important examples that at a minimum ought to give us pause. One is the interaction between St. John's wort and antiretroviral medications. In the case of a person with HIV/AIDS, the antiretrovirals are probably used for life-saving purposes. The St. John's wort is likely used for mood amelioration, but it's not life saving. Sadly, there are

circumstances in which St. John's wort substantially reduces the effect of antiretrovirals that are used in therapy, so there is need for caution there.