

Herbal Supplements: What You Don't Know Might Hurt You

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growing public desire to avoid the high cost of prescription medications, and a growing belief that natural products are safer and healthier than traditional options.

However, Marylou Martz, coordinator of student health services at PSH, was uncertain about the popularity of herbal products with students here.

She said the office has occasionally prescribed some herbal treatments, but only for plants listed in the herbal Physician's Desk Reference (PDR).

Examples include melatonin for sleep regulation and ephedra, which relieves nasal congestion.

"We don't hear a lot about it, and we wouldn't know unless they disclosed it during an exam or visit," she said.

Martz added that nontraditional students are most likely to request information about herbal supplements, but even those questions are sporadic since confusion still surrounds these products.

"One of the main problems with herbs is they are not FDA approved, and there is no efficacy data for many of them," said Martz.

"People don't know the toxic levels of some of these herbs, and they don't know what a safe dosage level is. One bottle of a supplement may say to take three pills, and a different bottle of the same thing might say to take

four."

Unlike prescription drugs, the FDA does not require herbal remedies to obtain approval, provided they are marketed as dietary supplements.

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 (DSHEA) also says the FDA does not need to mandate studies to determine the safety and effectiveness of herbs.

Makers of herbal products are also subject to minimal regulation by the FDA. An article from the alternative medicine section of the PlanetRx.com website stated that manufacturers do not have to provide concrete proof of their product's ability to achieve its claims.

Also, the makers do not have to provide information describing how herbs may interact with other medicines.

Furthermore, the newest niche in the medical market lacks any standards to test and maintain a supplement's quality, nor do manufacturers have to provide information concerning the long-term effects of herbs.

Though the herbal supplement market is largely unregulated by any government agency, some rules for labeling and selling them exist.

Manufacturers can only include claims on the label that describe the herb's overall effect on bodily structure and function.

One example might be "calcium builds strong bones." A dis-

claimer stating that the FDA has not tested the product for safety or effectiveness must appear on the package.

The problem with this caution is that consumers often need a magnifying glass to read it. The PlanetRx site states that the label must also list the name and amount of each ingredient, as well as its source.

It must categorize all ingredients according to FDA guidelines for recommended consumption, and it must list any ingredients that these guidelines do not cover.

Current labeling regulations do not require "alternative medicine" manufacturers to list information about the product's side effects.

The makers can also omit information describing their product's possible interactions with other drugs, and its potency, quality, and purity.

Since the FDA does not enforce standards to insure the quality of herbal supplements, the label may contain inaccurate information, according to registered dietitian Ellen Coleman in her online article "Herbs for Health."

If an herbal supplement's label either directly or indirectly states that it can diagnose, cure, treat, or prevent any illness, the FDA can deem it an illegal drug and force its removal from store shelves.

According to the Planet Rx website, the FDA began last year

to consider strategies that would create a set of regulations for herbal products that are similar to those enforced for prescription medicines.

Until those occur, Martz believes students should develop a healthy skepticism towards alternative medicines.

The university has no official policy regarding herbal supplement use because so many unknowns exist.

One way to learn about an herb's safety are to consult an herbal PDR, which is available in the PSH Student Health Services Office, or from any major bookstore. The Student Health Services Office also has information available about herbal supplements.

Another option is to visit a reliable Web site. Among the best choices are

HerbsHerbals.com and health.yahoo.com/health/alternative_medicine/.

Along with solid, basic information, these sites also list side effects and toxic levels, as well as special considerations people should address before using a supplement.

But neither of these strategies can substitute for talking with a licensed pharmacist, doctor, or other health care professional.

"Anytime students decide to take an herb, they should always discuss it with their physician," Martz said.

"It could interact with other medications, with past medical history, or with physical characteristics like weight. It's a student's decision to take herbs," she continued, "but I'm not opposed as long as they know that what they're taking is safe."

News from SGA

Valentine's Day Carnation Sale

The Student Government Association (SGA) has raised enough money to purchase the Pin Oaks for the Michael A. Herner Memorial. The SGA is now attempting to raise money to buy a suitable stone for the memorial.

The entire south side of the new library has been secured to establish the memorial.

The SGA is sponsoring a Valentine's Day carnation sale that will consist of three carnations and greens, wrapped in cellophane. Each will be sold for \$3.50.

On Monday, Feb. 7, Tuesday Feb. 8 and Wednesday, Feb. 9, the SGA will be in the Olmsted main lobby to presell the carnations.

In addition, the SGA we will be located in the Lion's Den Lobby on Feb. 10 to presell flowers. The times will be from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Money will be due when the order is placed. Also to add a special touch, SGA is offering the option for customers to pick-up their flowers or to have them delivered to a specific office on Feb. 14.

SGA will have extra flowers that can be purchased on Feb. 14.

All proceeds will benefit the Michael A. Herner Memorial, to purchase a stone and also to list all other students who lost their lives while attending PSH.

Spring Elections

To prepare for the spring elections that will be held on March 28, 29 and 30, SGA will hold an information session on Tuesday, Feb. 22 in the Gallery Lounge from 1 to 2 p.m. Pizza and soda will be served.

This session will be open to all students who are interested in running for the following positions for the 2000/2001 academic year:

- President
- Vice-president
- Treasurer
- Chair
- Executive Secretary
- Committee Secretary
- Public Relations Officer
- 2 Senior Senators At Large
- Senior Senator Behavioral Science & Education
- Senior Senator Business
- Senior Senator Humanities
- Senior Senator Science, Engineering & Technology
- Senior Senator Public Affairs

The information session will cover the duties, responsibilities and other helpful hints with their campaign.

The terms of office will be from mid-April 2000 through mid-April 2001.

There will also be the possibility for the new president to appoint up to five executive assistants who have unique qualities that would benefit SGA based on need.

Spring Clubfest



Photo by Nicole Burkholder

Members of the Lion Ambassadors shared information about their group last week at Clubfest.