

# SAFE Medicine

Protect Yourself from Medication Errors


The Institute  
for Safe  
Medication  
Practices

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## NATURALLY SPEAKING Herbs act like medicines in the body

 One in three Americans uses herbal remedies to manage the symptoms of illness and improve health. In general, experts agree that herbals are milder and safer than prescription drugs. But herbals act like medicines in the body. They can cause problems if too much is taken, if used too long, or if taken with certain medicines.

For example, ginseng can cause problems if taken with **Coumadin (warfarin)** or **Lanoxin (digoxin)**. One man who was taking **warfarin** to prevent blood

clots was doing well for many months. But when he started taking ginseng, his blood tests showed that he could have serious bleeding. When he stopped taking the ginseng, his blood tests returned to the desired levels without needing to change his dose of **warfarin**. Another patient with heart problems had been taking the same dose of **digoxin** for years. Then, all of a sudden, his tests showed that he had too much medicine in his

blood. This could make his heart beat too slowly. The doctors could not find a reason for this until the man said he had started taking ginseng. His blood test returned to normal shortly after he stopped taking the ginseng.

Another problem with herbals is worth mentioning. Unlike traditional medicines, herbals do not have to be

tested to make sure they are safe and effective. This limits our ability to know whether they could be harmful and what they can and can't do. It also allows the sellers of

herbals to make claims about their use that may or may not be true.

In 1998, *The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine* was formed to look at herbals scientifically. Today, reliable research is underway on this promising means to help manage your health. See **Check it out!** in the right column for tips on how to use herbals safely.

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### **Check it out!**

To use herbals safely:

✓ **Get to know your herbals.** Learn about the benefits as well as the risks and side effects of herbals you take. You can get information from your pharmacist, a reliable website (e.g., [www.mskcc.org/aboutherbs](http://www.mskcc.org/aboutherbs)), or from a book on herbals.

✓ **Report herbal use.** Don't be afraid to tell your doctors, nurses, and pharmacists about herbals you take, even if you are well. It may change the choice of a medicine your doctor prescribes for you, and allow your caregivers to give you advice on which herbals to stop while taking other medicines. If you become sick, telling your doctor about herbals you take might help to determine the cause of your illness.

✓ **Stop before surgery.** Some herbals can change the effects of medicines used during surgery or cause you to bleed (especially those that begin with "g" such as garlic, ginger, ginseng, and ginkgo). Always check with your doctor, but it's a good idea to stop herbals at least 1 week before surgery.

✓ **See a doctor.** Taking an herbal to treat ongoing symptoms like pain, fatigue, or a persistent rash may seem like a good idea. But don't let it keep you from seeking medical help. Herbals may help relieve symptoms, but not cure the illness. A delay in medical treatment could have serious consequences.

#### Contact Information



**Safe Medicine** is a unique consumer health education newsletter because it focuses on the prevention of medication errors. Every other month, **Safe Medicine** educates consumers how to become active partners with their healthcare practitioners and take a leading role in preventing medication errors. Safety tips are based on actual error reports received by the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP), the nation's only nonprofit organization devoted entirely to medication error prevention. Ask your employer to purchase a subscription to distribute to all employees to encourage healthy and safe medication use. Individual subscriptions are also available. To subscribe, please visit: [www.ismp.org/ConsumerArticles/index.htm](http://www.ismp.org/ConsumerArticles/index.htm).

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▶ Brand name medicines appear in **green**; generic medicines appear in **red**.