

Herbal and Natural Medicines

Page | 1

The use of herbal medicines has increased in Ireland in recent years. There is less evidence of the effectiveness of herbal and natural than conventional medicines. This is because, unlike conventional medicines, there is less stringent rules on clinical trials of these natural medicines. There is no doubt that natural medicines have many benefits. We stock many natural medicines in Whelehans and they prove very popular. We get very positive feedback from many of our customers about the effectiveness of natural medicines we sell. In this article I discuss the most popular natural medicines used in Ireland, including how they can be beneficial, possible side effects and interactions with other drugs. There can be a general perception that just because a medicine is natural that it must be safe. However, like any medicine, there are possible side effects and situations where they should not be used. People should be aware of these. You should always check with your pharmacist before taking a natural medicine, especially if you suffer from a long term medical condition or take a prescription medicine.

Echinacea

Echinacea is one of the most commonly used herbal medicines used in Ireland. It is derived from flowering plant called a purple coneflower which is in the daisy family. Studies have shown that Echinacea stimulates white blood cells which fight off infection and it boosts the level of T-cells and other components of the immune system. It is used to fight off infections including bacteria, viruses and fungus. It is most commonly used to prevent and fight off colds and flus. It is sometimes used for eczema, psoriasis and wound healing. There have been a few small studies showing its effectiveness; however there are no well designed or conclusive clinical trials to prove the effectiveness of Echinacea. Side effects are extremely rare with Echinacea, though allergic reactions, while very uncommon, have occurred in the past. There is little evidence of Echinacea interacting with other medicines, but it is best avoided with warfarin as there is anecdotal evidence it increases its effect. It should not be used people with multiple sclerosis and AIDs. Whelehans own brand Echinacea tablets are €6.99 per pack of 40 (33% extra free).

Garlic

Garlic is beneficial in preventing heart disease. Some recent studies show that it beneficial in lowering total cholesterol including bad LDL cholesterol. It may help in preventing clots and there is some evidence of its benefits in lowering blood pressure. Whelehans Odourless one a day Garlic Capsules are €3.95 per 30 pack. Garlic is also a powerful antioxidant and is great for preventing and fighting colds. It stimulates the activity of white blood cells which means it helps fight off infection. It also stimulates enzymes in the liver that get rid of toxic substances in the body including carcinogens. Garlic interacts with warfarin to increase the risk of bleeding and it reduces the blood concentration of some HIV drugs such as saquinavir. Therefore, it should not be used with these medicines.

Lecithin

Lecithin is a phospholipid which is needed by all living cells and is present naturally in our bodies. It has been shown to reduce cholesterol by binding cholesterol and fats to water in your intestinal tract, hence reducing the absorption of cholesterol. There is scientific evidence of the benefit of soy derived lecithin. I would not recommend anybody with very high cholesterol (greater than 6.5mmol/L) to try reduce their cholesterol with lecithin alone. Anybody with high cholesterol should go to their GP to consider options like prescription only statins. This is because cholesterol is such a massive risk factor for heart disease; therefore getting cholesterol lowered quickly is paramount. During Whelehans Heart Screening clinics we check for cholesterol; we often come across people with borderline high cholesterol.

In these situations, we find that a lecithin supplement along with an improved diet is often enough to get cholesterol below the recommended 5.2mmol/L level when we do a three month follow up. Whelehans Lecithin 1200mg capsules are derived from soy. They are €6.99 per 90 and the recommended dosage is one or two per day. Side effects of lecithin are extremely rare if taken at the recommended dosage.

Page | 2 **Ginseng**

Ginseng is commonly used to boost energy and stamina. There is some who believe it boosts concentration and memory. It is thought to do this by boosting the activity of neurotransmitters in the brain. It is thought to increase the body's resistance to stress. There is anecdotal evidence that it acts as an aphrodisiac, however there is no clinical evidence of this. The incidence of side effects is low, however there are some reports of temporary nervousness, headache, insomnia, inability to concentrate, increase in blood pressure and allergies. There are some reports of an oestrogen like effect in post menopausal women causing vaginal bleeding in some elderly patients. It should not be used in pregnancy, people with high blood pressure and diabetics. It should be avoided by those suffering from inflammatory conditions and COPD (bronchitis) as there is evidence it makes them worse. It interacts with steroidal drugs used for inflammatory conditions like bronchitis and arthritis and it increases the effect of some diabetic drugs.

St John's Wort

St John's Wort is well known for its mild antidepressant properties. It is thought to be effective for mild to moderate depression. Its active ingredient is hypericin which is thought to have an effect on the level of serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline in the brain to boost mood. It is thought to work in a similar way to the newest family of antidepressants available on prescription called SSRIs. Prozac is an example of an SSRI. In some countries such as Germany, it is commonly used to treat mild depression, especially in children and adolescents. A number of trials have been done on St John's Wort, but according to the National Medicine Information Centre in St James Hospital, Dublin, "most have been flawed due to the methodology, selection criteria or rating scales used". A report in the medical Journal Cochrane Review in 2008 stated that it is as effective as standard antidepressants and with fewer side effects. Other studies have been less conclusive.

St John's Wort is available over the counter in many countries but has been a prescription only medicine in Ireland since 2000 because of serious concerns for its safety. The main problem is that it interacts with so many medicines. This is because it stimulates an enzyme called cytochrome P450 in the body, which is a major enzyme in breaking down and getting rid of drugs from our bodies. Therefore it reduces the effect of many drugs. This is especially true for drugs with "narrow therapeutic indexes", meaning there is a fine balance between them being non-effective, effective and toxic. Therefore, it should not be used by people taking warfarin for blood clots, digoxin for heart conditions, cyclosporin for organ transplants and theophylline for asthma and bronchitis. Other major interactions are with benzodiazepines (used for anxiety) and HIV medication. It can also reduce the effect of oral contraceptives leading to unplanned pregnancies. It should not be taken with prescription antidepressants. You should never take St John's Wort with other medicines before checking with your pharmacist or GP. Side effects reported with St John's Wort include gastrointestinal side effects, dizziness, confusion, drowsiness and increased sensitivity to light. NICE, the drug advisory body in the UK advise against taking St John's Wort because of variations in strengths of different preparations, concerns about appropriate dosage and duration of effect and interactions with other medicines.

Ginkgo Biloba

Page | 3

Ginkgo is thought to stimulate blood flow in the brain and hence increase memory and alertness. It is only available on prescription in Ireland. Many trials have been done on its effectiveness. Some trials have proven positive about its benefit in slowing down the progression of early stage Alzheimer's disease. Studies have shown reasonable success in improving the symptoms of intermittent claudication; including increasing walking distances. Intermittent claudication is a condition common in people over 65 caused by poor circulation. Symptoms include pain, cramps and numbness in muscles, especially the calf. There is uncertainty about the long term safety and efficacy of Ginkgo Biloba and whether it should be used long term or intermittently. Side effects are rare, the main ones being headaches and stomach upset. Diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting occurred in less than 1% of clinical trials. There is little information about its interaction with other drugs but it has been shown to increase bleeding in drugs used to prevent clots. Therefore it should not be taken with warfarin, aspirin or clopidogrel (Plavix[®], Clodel[®]). It should not be used during pregnancy.

Valerian

Valerian is a herb used as a mild sedative to aid sleep. It is thought to work by increasing the neurotransmitter GABA in the brain. This is the same neurotransmitter that prescription sleeping tablets like zolpidem exert their effect on. Studies done so far do not conclusively confirm the effectiveness of valerian for the treatment of insomnia. Few side effects have been reported. Possible side effects include headaches, dizziness, itching and gastrointestinal disturbance. Hangover the next morning is extremely rare. Valerian should not be taken by pregnant or breastfeeding women or by people on prescription only sedatives such as benzodiazepines. In my experience, valerian is of no benefit to those suffering from long term and chronic insomnia. However, it may be of benefit to those suffering from short term sleep disturbance. Whelehans Valerian tablets are €4.99 per 30.

New rules for herbal medicines

New EU rules came into law from May 1st 2011 regarding the sale of herbal medicines. The new rules aim to protect consumers from potential adverse effects of herbal medicines. The new law means that herbal medicines will have to adhere to certain guidelines or they will be taken off the shelves. As of May 2011, about 50 herbs have been taken off the market in the UK, including horny goat weed, the so called "natural Viagra". However many well known herbs such as Arnica, Echinacea and St John's Wort have passed the new regulations in the UK. It is difficult to say how many herbal medicines will go off the market in Ireland. The new rules mean herbal medicines must now be manufactured to the same standards as conventional medicines and must be proven safe before they can be sold. Therefore the new rules are good for consumers. The Irish Medical Board (IMB) have been registering herbal medicines in Ireland since 2007, and as of May 1st last, any herbal medicine not registered with the IMB by the manufacturer can no longer be sold. You can view which herbal medicines are now registered on the Irish Medical Board's website (www.imb.ie). When I get more information on how the new rules are affecting the availability of herbal medicines in Ireland, I will let you know.

Dietician Service

Whelehans have introduced a new dietician service in conjunction with Pfizer. We will have a qualified dietician to advise on dietary problems in adults and children (eg) food intolerance, coeliac disease, fussy eating in children, inability to lose weight or gain weight. Bookings are by appointment only. This service is free.