

Recommendations

Individuals should:

- Tell their physician and other health care providers what natural health product(s) they are taking and why.
- Report to their physician any adverse reactions from taking a natural health product.
- Choose products that have a DIN (Drug Identification Number), NPN (Natural Product Number) or DIN-HM (Drug Identification Number – Homeopathic Medicine) on the label. These numbers mean that the product's formulation, labelling and instructions for use has been reviewed and approved by Health Canada.

Health Benefits

Individuals often select natural health products to gain more control over their own health as well as to positively influence it.¹ According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (formerly the American Dietetic Association), Americans report using supplements for a variety of reasons, including insurance for an inadequate diet, to prevent or treat disease, to increase energy levels, or to reduce the risk of infectious illnesses.² Additionally, some individuals choose natural health products to help lose weight.

Individuals should be well-informed about the natural health product they are taking or considering taking and should ask themselves questions, like why they want or need to take it, is it safe, is it effective, do the possible benefits outweigh the possible risks?³

Individuals should consult with their physician and other health care providers for more information and guidance on any specific natural health product.^{2,3}

Key Questions

What are natural health products?⁴

Natural health products (NHPs) are naturally occurring substances made from plants, animals, microorganisms or marine sources which are used to restore or maintain good health. They are available in a wide variety of forms, including tablets, capsules, tinctures, solutions, creams, ointments and drops.

Natural health products include:

- vitamins and minerals
- herbal remedies
- homeopathic medicines
- traditional medicines like traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic (East Indian) medicines
- probiotics
- other products like amino acids and essential fatty acids

Natural health products must be safe to be used as over-the-counter products. Products needing a prescription are regulated as drugs.

How do I know if a natural health product is safe or effective?⁴

In Canada, natural health products can be licensed by Health Canada. To be licensed, the product must be safe, effective, of high quality and carry detailed label information to allow people to make informed choices.

All products that have been licensed for sale in Canada have a Natural Product Number (NPN), a Drug Identification Number (DIN), or Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM) on the label.

A NPN, DIN, or DIN-HM means that the product has been authorized for sale in Canada and is safe and effective when the instructions on the label are followed.

Where can I find current, reliable information about natural health products?

- The Alberta Health Services (AHS) intranet e-library service (<http://insite.albertahealthservices.ca/899.asp>) provides a link to the **Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database** (www.naturaldatabase.com). For non-AHS users, a subscription is required to access this site.
- The **Licensed Natural Health Products Database (LNHPD)** contains product-specific information on natural health products that have been issued a product license by Health Canada (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/applications/licen-prod/lnhpd-bdpsnh-eng.php>)
- Health Canada has a link to search acceptable **medicinal ingredients** used in natural health products sold in Canada (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/applications/online-enligne/nhpid-bipsn-eng.php>)
- The **National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)** is a branch of the National Institute of Health in the United States. NCCAM is a lead agency for scientific research on the diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine (www.nccam.nih.gov)

What are the possible health risks in taking herbal products?

Some natural health products are the source of active ingredients in medications. Therefore, these products can interact with food, other medications, and may cause unwanted side effects.

Individuals need to consider the possible side effects or risks involved in taking natural health products. These include:¹

- Taking a product for a self-diagnosed condition that could be potentially serious.
- Avoiding or delaying effective supervised treatment for a medical condition.
- Interaction with prescription, over-the-counter, or other natural health products resulting in reduced or enhanced effects (such as side effects or overdose).
- Allergic reactions.
- Spending money on natural health products that may cause future financial constraints and interfere with the ability to pay for conventional treatments, if and when needed.

Nutrition Guideline

Natural Health Products

For Professional Reference Only

Applicable to: Nurses, Physicians and Other Health Professionals

How can individuals minimize their risk?

In order to reduce the risk of adverse effects, individuals should take the following steps:¹

- Talk to a physician or pharmacist before choosing a natural health product. This is especially important for children, pregnant or breast-feeding women, seniors, and individuals with serious medical conditions.
- Inform the physician what natural health products are being taken and for what reason.
- Use products that have a DIN (Drug Identification Number), NPN (Natural Product Number) or DIN-HM (Drug Identification Number – Homeopathic Medicine) on the label, which signifies that the product has undergone and passed a review of its formulation, labeling and instructions for use.
- Look at the evidence that supports the safety and efficacy of the product.
- Avoid products that make outrageous claims that sound too good to be true.
- Know what side effects and drug interactions can be expected and report any adverse reaction to their physician and to Health Canada (866) 234-2345.
- Purchase products from reputable sources and be aware of the seller's motives, including his or her personal or financial gain.

Are there any handouts on natural health products I can use with my clients?

Refer to approved provincial Alberta Health Services natural health products nutrition handouts to support patient education. For more information, contact Nutrition.Resources@albertahealthservices.ca

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References

- ¹ Health Canada [homepage on the internet]. Safe use of natural health products [about 4 screens]. 2004 [cited 2012 Nov 16]. Available from: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/med/nat-prod-eng.php>
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- ³ Kaegi E and Institute. Task Force on Alternative Therapies of the Canadian Breast Cancer Research. A patient's guide to unconventional therapies. CMAJ.1998 May 5;158(9):1161-5.
- ⁴ Health Canada [homepage on the internet]. About Natural Health Products.[Internet] 2012 [cited 2012 Nov 19]. Available from: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/about-apropos/cons-eng.php>