

Reactions to Complementary and Alternative Medicines

This article has been reviewed by Thanai Pongdee, MD, FAAAAI



Pharmacy shelves are stocked with supplements for healthy living. These complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) are used by millions of people.

Although they are intended to prevent illness, ease symptoms or treat disease, some of these products can do more harm than good—es-

pecially if you have a chronic condition such as an allergy or asthma.

“Natural” does not always mean safe.

While prescription and over-the-counter drugs must go through rigorous safety and efficacy testing before they can be sold, herbal medicines do not. Instead, the U.S. government classifies these herbs as dietary supplements, rather than a food or drug.

For people with allergies or asthma, this difference can pose real risks.

Labeling

Herbs and vitamins do not need to conform to laws requiring labeling. Ingredient labels for these supplements may be incomplete or incorrect. This can create risks for people with allergies to drugs, foods or pollens.

Herbal remedies, including teas, made from plants can cause allergic reactions, such as hives, or can induce asthma symptoms.

Although chamomile and various other herbal teas may be calming, these products can cause an allergic reaction for people with a ragweed pollen allergy.

If you have a ragweed allergy, you should also avoid Echinacea. These two plants are closely related. Rather than fighting a cold, Echinacea may cause allergy symptoms – leaving you feeling even more miserable.

Combining treatments

Even herbal products that are considered safe can be dangerous when mixed with other medications (prescription or over-the-counter). If you decide to use a dietary supplement and you have allergies or asthma, check first with your allergist/immunologist. Tell all your healthcare providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. This will help coordinate your care.

To the Point

The term “alternative medicine” refers to something used instead of conventional medical treatments. Complementary medicine is used along with more traditional approaches.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Tell your allergist/immunologist if you are using any CAM therapies, as they can influence your prescribed treatments.
- Herbal remedies and deep breathing exercises are the most commonly used CAM approaches.
- The most common reasons people use CAM are back pain, neck pain, joint pain and depression or anxiety.



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