

Complementary Medicines

In Australia, traditional, herbal and natural medicines and remedies are referred to as 'complementary medicines' or 'complementary and alternative medicines' (CAMs). Many people believe complementary medicines are harmless, but they can interact with other medicines and they can cause adverse effects.

What are complementary medicines?

Complementary medicines include herbal medicines, vitamins, minerals and other nutritional supplements, Australian indigenous medicines, traditional Indian medicines, traditional Chinese medicines, homeopathic medicines and aromatherapy products. They may be of herbal or non-herbal origin. In complementary medicine, 'herb' means any part of a plant traditionally used as medicine and may include the leaf, flower, stem, root, fruit or bark of the plant.

Some complementary medicines are made or supplied by naturopaths, homeopaths, herbalists and other practitioners, and some can be purchased from pharmacies and other shops.



Are they effective?

All complementary medicines sold in Australia must meet the government standards for quality and safety. However, the manufacturers don't have to provide as much scientific

evidence of their product's effects as do manufacturers of prescription and pharmacy medicines. This usually means that a lot less is known about the benefits, side effects and interactions of complementary medicines, compared to prescription and pharmacy medicines.

Using complementary medicines safely

Complementary medicines need to be treated with the same care and respect as other medicines.

Many complementary medicines can cause side effects and some may interact and interfere with other medicines.

Before using a complementary medicine, consult a doctor, pharmacist or other qualified practitioner if you are:

- Using any other medicine, either prescribed by a doctor or purchased from a pharmacy or elsewhere
- Using any other complementary medicine
- Sensitive or allergic to any medicine or ingredient of medicinal products (e.g., gluten, lactose, preservatives)
- Pregnant or planning to become pregnant
- Breast feeding
- Planning to have surgery.

If using a complementary medicine made up by a practitioner, make sure that practitioner is suitably qualified and is a member of a recognised professional organisation.

Important

- Always include all complementary medicines on your medicines list and make sure your doctor and pharmacist know you are taking them.
- Do not stop a prescribed medicine and use a complementary medicine instead – check with your doctor first.
- If you want to try a complementary medicine in addition to prescribed or other medicine – check with your doctor or pharmacist first.
- Some complementary medicines are not safe to take when pregnant or breast feeding – check with your doctor, pharmacist or complementary medicine practitioner.
- Some complementary medicines should be stopped at least one week before surgery – check with your doctor, pharmacist or complementary medicine practitioner.
- Do not give a complementary medicine to a child, unless the product information states it is safe for children and gives a children's dose.
- Like all medicines, complementary medicines must be stored out of the reach of children.

Some complementary medicines, reported uses and current evidence for use:

Complementary medicine	Some reported uses	Scientific evidence for use	Some known precautions
Black Cohosh	Premenstrual syndrome, dysmenorrhoea, menopausal symptoms	Some relief of menopausal symptoms	Interacts with some medicines. Avoid in certain medical conditions. May cause liver damage
Cranberry	Preventing urinary tract infection, reducing urinary odour	Can prevent urinary tract infection in women	Interacts with some medicines (e.g., warfarin)
Chondroitin	Osteoarthritis, eye lubrication, heart disease, osteoporosis, cancer	Conflicting evidence of benefit in osteoarthritis. Can act as an eye lubricant during eye surgery	May increase risk of bleeding. Some products are derived from shark cartilage
Echinacea	Wound healing, treatment and prevention of the common cold and chronic respiratory tract infections	No conclusive evidence of benefit	May cause allergy reactions. Avoid in certain medical conditions. May interact with some medicines. Cease use 10 days before surgery
Evening Primrose Oil	Eczema, premenstrual syndrome, psoriasis, breast cancer, mastalgia, ADHD, schizophrenia	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines
Fish Oil (contains omega-3 fatty acids)	Heart and blood vessel disease, rheumatoid arthritis, depression, asthma, dermatitis, schizophrenia, diabetes, ADHD	Can lower blood triglycerides. Can reduce risk of heart attack, stroke and death in cardiovascular disease. Can reduce joint stiffness and tenderness in RA. May be of benefit in ADHD	May increase risk of bleeding when taken with other medicines that increase bleeding
Ginger	Nausea and vomiting	Can relieve nausea and vomiting with pregnancy. May relieve sea sickness	May increase risk of bleeding. Cease use at least 7 days before surgery
Ginkgo	Dementia, tinnitus, preventing macular degeneration, intermittent claudication	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines. May increase risk of bleeding. Cease use at least 7 days before surgery
Ginseng	Enhancing mental and physical performance, boosting immune system, type 2 diabetes, herpes simplex type 2 infection, chronic fatigue syndrome, heart disease	No conclusive evidence of benefit	Interacts with some medicines. Avoid in certain medical conditions
Glucosamine	Osteoarthritis, back pain, glaucoma	Conflicting evidence of benefit in osteoarthritis – may reduce pain and improve physical function	Some products derived from shellfish. May increase INR when taken with warfarin. Use with caution in renal impairment
Guarana (contains caffeine)	Psychostimulant promoting mental alertness, weight loss aid	Some evidence of improved task performance	High doses may cause caffeine side effects and withdrawal effects. Interacts with some medicines. Avoid in certain medical conditions
Red Clover (contains phyto-oestrogens)	Menopausal symptoms, arterial stiffness, osteoporosis, eczema, psoriasis, lowering cholesterol, prostate problems	Some evidence of improved arterial blood flow. May increase bone mineral density.	Interacts with some medicines. Avoid in certain medical conditions. Cease 7 days before surgery
Soy (contains phytoestrogens)	Menopausal symptoms, lowering cholesterol, osteoporosis, prostate cancer	Dietary soy may reduce hot flushes and may lower cholesterol	Interacts with some medicines. Avoid in certain medical conditions
St. John's Wort	Depression, menopausal mood symptoms, eczema	Can improve mild to moderate depression and menopausal mood symptoms	Interacts with many medicines (e.g., antidepressants, oral contraceptives, warfarin). Cease at least 10 days before surgery
Valerian	Sedative for sleeping problems and anxiety	Some evidence of improved sleep	Avoid in certain medical conditions. Avoid use with alcohol

Ask a pharmacist for advice before using complementary medicines.

For more information

Cochrane Consumer Network

Website: www.cochrane.org/consumers/homepage.htm

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your Self Care Pharmacy: