

Natural Health Products During Cancer Treatments

This handout offers information on the risks of taking natural health products during your cancer treatments.

Natural health products include:

- Vitamins (examples: A, B, C, D, E)
- Minerals (examples: magnesium, calcium, selenium)
- Herbs in large amounts or concentrated forms (examples: turmeric shots, ginger tea, oregano oil).
- Antioxidants (examples: vitamin C, vitamin E, beta carotene, selenium)
- Supplements (examples: mushroom pills, St. John's wort, echinacea, milk, thistle)

Some people with cancer choose to take natural health products hoping to:

- Boost their immune system
- Destroy cancer cells
- Reduce side effects of cancer treatment.

Natural health products are not standardized in how they are made. This means that how well they work or any side effects they cause may differ among brands or even within different lots of the same brand. The natural health product you buy in health food or grocery stores may not be the same as the form used in research. The long-term effects of most natural health products are not known.

Taking natural health products during your cancer treatments may reduce the effectiveness of your cancer treatments. Some natural health products can also make the symptoms and side effects of your cancer treatment worse.

Talk to your pharmacist or oncologist (cancer doctor) before you decide to take any vitamins, minerals, herbs, antioxidants or any other natural health products. It is also important you tell your oncologist if you are already taking any natural health product before you start cancer treatment.

You can find more information on natural health products and the potential risks of taking them during your cancer treatments on the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre website on the “about herbs, botanicals and other products” page found at: [mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs](https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs).

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