

RISKY Home Remedies

Warning! These natural cures can be dangerous. Read this before popping a pill or spooning up a supplement By Kathleen McAuliffe



As consumers continue to search for remedies for the common cold and weight-loss woes, herbal products have become a \$4 billion-a-year industry. But while demand has grown, regulatory oversight of the industry has weakened, thanks to a 1994 law that lifted a requirement for pre-market testing.

Recently, people taking supplements have reported complaints ranging from minor reactions like headaches and stomach upsets to heart attacks, strokes, seizures, liver poisoning and even death. While the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has received about 3,000 such reports of adverse reactions in the last seven years, experts say the true number is no doubt higher because problems often go unreported. In some cases, the herb itself may be dangerous; in others, the real threat is poor

quality control. In recent independent tests of popular supplements such as St. John's wort, DHEA (a hormone found naturally in the body; supplements claim to boost libido, slow aging and more) and melatonin, some brands were found to have little or none of the active ingredients listed on the label, while others contained more—in one case, a 50 percent overdose. In the fall of 1998, Richard J. Ko, a pharmacist with the California Department of Health Services, tested 260 imported herbal medicines from California retail stores. One third contained drugs that were not listed on the label or were tainted with such toxic heavy metals as lead, mercury and arsenic.

How can you protect yourself? To reduce your risk, try to find a doctor knowledgeable about dietary supplements (some now get training in

herbal medicine) who is willing to watch carefully for any side effects and be alert to any interactions with medication you are already taking. Most important, says Elizabeth Yetley, lead scientist for nutrition at the FDA, never take a chance with any supplement that has a reputation for being dangerous. Below are some leading offenders.

EPHEDRA (also known as ma huang)



What it is: The stems and roots of certain evergreen shrubs, which can be taken as a tablet, tincture or tea.

Reasons for use: To relieve symptoms of asthma, congestion and other conditions. Some *(continued)*

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formulas are also being hyped as a way to increase stamina and metabolism and suppress appetite.

The risks: The active ingredient in ephedra is ephedrine, a stimulant found in many over-the-counter cold products. In small doses it relieves nasal congestion and opens the bronchial passages. But it can also rev up the heart, elevate blood pressure and trigger nervousness, psychosis, insomnia, stroke, heart attack and death. Ephedra poses a particularly grave threat to pregnant women and people suffering from high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. It has been linked to hundreds of illnesses and injuries—including at least eleven deaths—mostly in otherwise healthy young or middle-aged adults who were using the products for weight control or as an energy booster. Since 1997, the FDA has been considering a proposal to require warning labels on ephedra supplements. In the meantime, some states have taken steps to restrict the sale of these products.

GAMMA BUTYROLACTONE (GBL)

What it is: A chemical sold in liquid and powder form under brand names such as Renewtriant and Blue Nitro.

Reasons for use: Touted as an aphrodisiac, stress reducer, sleep aid, weight-loss aid, muscle builder and a way to get a “natural high.”

The risks: Although labeled as a dietary supplement, GBL is an illegally marketed drug that is rapidly converted by the body into GHB—the “date rape drug.” Highly potent, GBL has been associated with 242 adverse reactions, 191 of which were considered serious and life-threatening. As of December of 1999, at least six deaths had been reported. Common side effects include depressed breathing, vomiting, seizures and slow heart rate, and users may become comatose. Last year, the FDA requested a recall of all GBL-containing supplements. But the chemical continues to be illegally peddled over the Internet.

5-HYDROXYTRYPTOPHAN (5-HTP)

What it is: Made from a plant, 5-HTP is also formed when the body transforms the amino acid tryptophan into compounds such as melatonin (which helps regulate sleep) and serotonin (the brain’s “feel-good” chemical). It is usually sold in capsule form.

Reasons for use: Marketed as an antidepressant, sleep aid, and treatment for obesity, migraines and PMS.

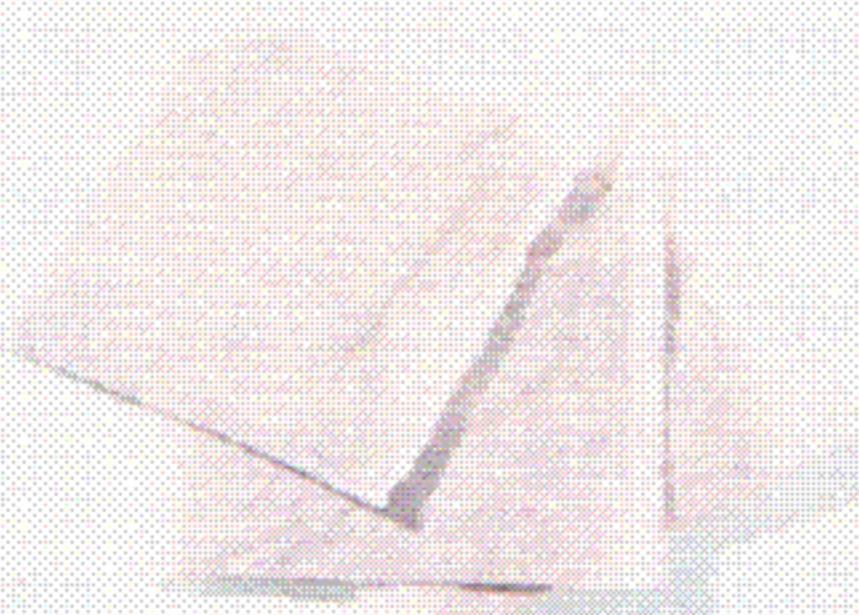
The risks: Side effects include nausea, vomiting and tremors. 5-HTP, a precursor of serotonin, might even be lethal if combined with serotonin-boosting antidepressants such as Prozac, cautions William Byerley, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, Irvine. To add to concerns, several batches of 5-HTP sold at health-food stores in 1998 were found to be contaminated with “peak X,” an impurity that has been linked to eosinophilia-myalgia syndrome (EMS), a debilitating, incurable disorder that can cause paralysis and death. In 1989, 1,500 people who took supplements of L-tryptophan contaminated with peak X developed EMS, and thirty-eight died.

DIETER'S BREWS

What they are: Herbal teas containing senna, aloe, buckthorn, cascara and other plant-derived laxatives.

Reasons for use: To promote weight loss and cleanse the body.

The risks: According to the FDA, the health risks are greatest with prolonged steeping or excessive drinking of the teas, few of which are clearly labeled as laxatives. Reactions include cramping, nausea, vomiting, chronic diarrhea and laxative dependency. In rigorous dieters and women with anorexia or bulimia, dieter’s teas can cause electrolyte imbalances, leading to dangerous dehydration and an erratic heartbeat. By 1995, dieter’s teas were suspected of having contributed to the deaths of at least four young women with eating disorders. At *(continued)*



MORE Protection



There is a new ingredient you should look for when you shop for Sun Protection Lotions: **Parsol®1789**. It blocks the previously unstoppable part of the **UVA1** spectrum, which is responsible for long term skin damage and premature aging. Seen by dermatologists as an important supplement to traditional sunscreens, this patented ingredient is absent in most brands presently sold in America.

Ocean Potion® advanced formulas combine Parsol 1789 *plus* the traditional UVA/UVB inhibiting compounds with Anti-Oxidant Vitamins A, C & E and Seaplant Extracts to provide the most complete sun protection available.

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that time, an FDA advisory panel recommended warning labels on such products—a proposal still under evaluation.

COMFREY

What it is: A leafy plant sold as teas, tablets, tinctures, poultices and creams.



Reasons for use: To stimulate healing of wounds, ranging from cuts, bruises and burns

to bleeding gums and stomach ulcers.

The risk: Comfrey contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids (PAs), well-documented toxins that may cause liver and pancreatic tumors. Oral formulations of comfrey have been linked to hepatic veno-occlusive disease, a condition in which veins leading to the liver become blocked, leading to cirrhosis (or scarring) of the organ. The risk is greatest when the herb is used for long periods of time, but repeated short-term use could have cumulative effects. Topical preparations may be safe, but one study found that when applied to the skin of rodents, PAs were detected in the animal's urine. "It is possible that some PAs can pass through the skin, moving into the bloodstream and to the liver," says Ara Paul, professor of pharmacognosy at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "No one knows what the cumulative effects could be." The German government cautions against using topical preparations of comfrey for longer than four to six weeks.

CHAPARRAL (also known as creosote bush or greasewood)

What it is: Twigs and leaves from the desert shrub *Larrea tridentata*, which may be sold as tea, capsules, tablets or tincture.



Reasons for use: Promoted as a "blood purifier," cancer cure, anti-aging remedy and acne treatment.

The risks: Chaparral's alleged anticancer benefits have not been confirmed in humans, and some studies even suggest it promotes more cancers than it thwarts. Still more worrisome, chaparral has been linked to at least thirteen cases of liver disease, which is often characterized by jaundice. One thirty-three-year-old woman took fifteen tablets daily for five months in the belief that it would improve a benign lump in her breast. She developed such severe hepatitis that she required hospitalization. (Her condition cleared up after she stopped taking the pills.) Though many cases of chaparral-induced liver disease have been reversible, some have resulted in permanent liver damage. In 1992, the FDA issued a warning about chaparral's potential toxicity, causing many distributors to recall the products from store shelves. But since then, the herb has quietly crept back onto the market.

LOBELIA (also known as Indian tobacco)

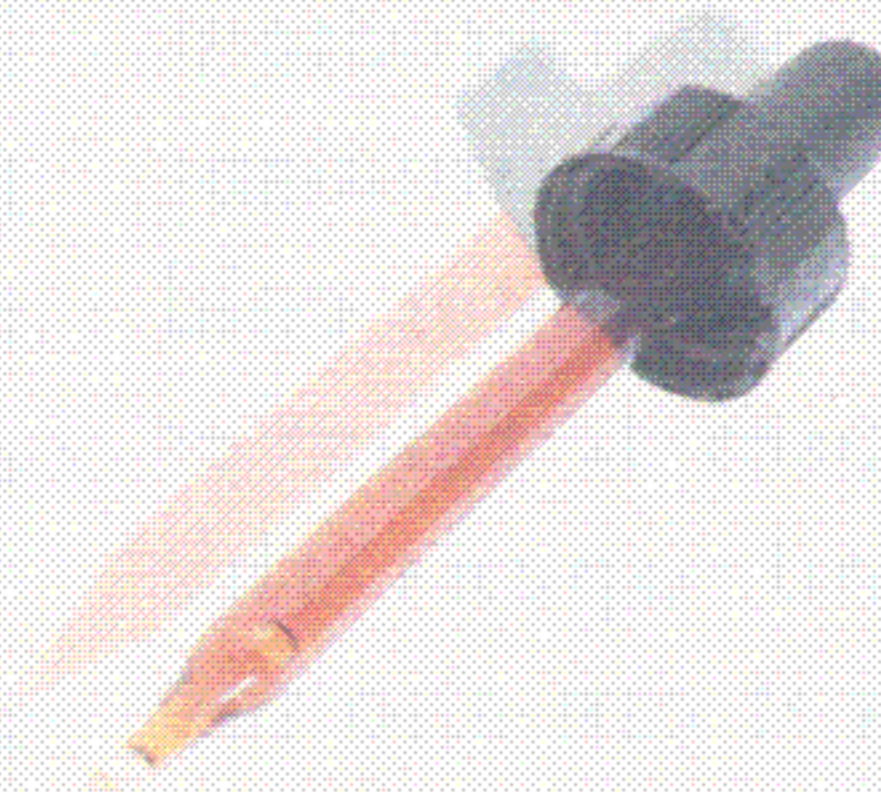
What it is: The dried leaves of a plant used in chewing gums, tablets, lozenges or rolled for smoking.

Reasons for use: Marketed as a stop-smoking aid and for the treatment of asthma and bronchitis.

The risks: At low doses, lobelia opens bronchial passages and aids breathing, but it may also cause a rapid heart rate. One of the main risks, says Steven Foster, co-author of *Tyler's Honest Herbal* (The Haworth Herbal Press, 1999), is that it may take users by surprise. "Lobelia works quickly, and as the lungs clear, it could lead to choking." At higher doses, lobelia can induce severe vomiting and cause respiratory depression and hypotension. Lobelia is particularly dangerous to children, pregnant women and people with heart disease.

PENNYROYAL

What it is: Leaves and flowers from two plants in the mint family, which are sold as a dry herb extract, oil or tincture.



Reasons for use: To treat colds, headaches, stomach upsets and for dressing wounds. Pennyroyal also has a reputation for stimulating menstrual flow—a common euphemism for its alleged ability to induce abortions.

The risks: Though there are more than a dozen reports of adverse reactions to the herb, "Pennyroyal is probably more dangerous than it has been reported," Foster says. Pennyroyal oil is particularly harmful, since about 90 percent of it is made of pulegone, a substance that is highly destructive to the liver. The oil should never be taken internally, but some women have taken it in an effort to terminate a pregnancy. This could have disastrous results—just two tablespoons of the oil were enough to kill a pregnant eighteen-year-old woman, even though she received prompt medical treatment. Pennyroyal tea, which contains only tiny amounts of the oil, may be safer, but recent reports show that it does pose some risks. A 1996 report found that two infants suffered multiple organ failure when their mothers fed them pennyroyal tea. One recovered after two months of hospitalization; the other died. ■

Kathleen McAuliffe is a regular contributor to Ladies' Home Journal.

For more information on herbal remedies, check out *Tyler's Honest Herbal*, by Steven Foster and Varro E. Tyler, Ph.D. (The Haworth Herbal Press, 1999), and *The American Pharmaceutical Association Practical Guide to Natural Medicines*, by Andrea Peirce (William Morrow, 1999). To report adverse reactions, call 800-332-1088.