



Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers

Alternative Medicines That “COULD” Be Harmful In Patients with Multiple Sclerosis

Alternative medicine is widely used in the United States. In 1998, Dr. David Eisenberg estimated that 42% of Americans use some form of complimentary alternative medicine (CAM)¹. A similar study was conducted with multiple sclerosis (MS) patients at the Rocky Mountain MS Center in 1997. This study found that 67% of MS patients used some form of CAM². One could conclude from this data that MS patients are more likely to use alternative or unconventional medicine than non-MS patients.

Concerning alternative medicine, patients with and without MS have one thing in common; they RARELY admit to their doctors that they use it. This can be very dangerous because 90% of individuals who use alternative medicine also use conventional medicine². Drug interactions can occur between conventional and unconventional medications just like they can occur between conventional medicines. The best way to avoid ALL drug interactions is to make your physicians aware of any and all medications (conventional and unconventional) that you use.

MS is a very complicated disease that affects both the immune and nervous systems. In order to understand which alternative medications are safe and unsafe in MS, it is necessary to examine the disease. Patients with MS have an up-regulated or excessively active immune system. CD4-TH1 cells in the immune system attack the myelin in the nervous system. Multiple sclerotic plaques then develop in the CNS and axonal damage can result.

The immune system in the MS patient is the opposite from the immune system in a cancer or HIV patient. These patients have a suppressed immune system. Therefore, immune-stimulating therapies that would be helpful for cancer and HIV patients may actually be harmful in MS patients. A general rule of thumb for alternative medicine and MS: **If a particular product is recommended for a condition where the immune system is suppressed (i.e. cancer, HIV, colds, etc), AVOID THE PRODUCT IN MS.**

Many alternative medications are known to stimulate the immune system. While these products are beneficial in treating conditions of a weakened immune system, they can possibly worsen MS since it is a disease of an up-regulated immune system. It is very important for MS patients to be aware of alternative medications that can up-regulate the immune system. The following alternative medications pose potential risks for the MS patient because of their immune stimulating properties.³

- *Alfalfa*
- *Arnica*
- *Cat's Claw*
- *Echinacea*
- *Garlic supplements*
- *Ginseng, Asian*
- *Ginseng, Siberian*
- *Goldenseal*
- *Grape Seed Extract*
- *Green tea*
- *Licorice*
- *Saw palmetto*

In high doses, certain vitamins may also stimulate the immune system. It is best to avoid HIGH DOSES of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Beta-Carotene, and Zinc in MS patients. Taking the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of these products poses no risk to patients with MS.

As mentioned above it is very important to talk with your doctor before you take alternative medications. This gives you and your physician the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of the agents in question. This advice is especially true for MS patients since certain alternative medicines can theoretically worsen the course of the disease. Basically, when it comes to your body and your health, it is better to be safe than sorry.

If topic is of interest you, let me suggest 2 references. The first is a book titled *Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis* by Allen C. Bowling, MD, PhD. The second is an internet site (www.ms-cam.org) that focuses on CAM and MS. This Internet site, like the book, contains a wealth of information.

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Five Basic Truths Regarding CAM and MS:

1. Tell your doctor about all medications that you take (conventional and unconventional)
2. Realize that information you read (in print or on the internet) may or may NOT be correct
3. MS is a disease that involves an up-regulated immune system; therefore, products that stimulate the immune system may be contraindicated.
4. Anything that has a positive effect on the body can also have a negative effect on the body.
5. Just because an alternative medicine has scientific evidence to back up its claims does NOT mean that controlled clinical trials have proven its use.

References:

¹Eisenberg D, Davis R, Ettner S, et al. Trends in alternative medicine use in the United States, 1990-1997. *JAMA* 1998; 280:1569-1575

²Bowling A. *Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis*. New York: Demos Medical Publishing, Inc, 2001:8.

²Bowling A. *Alternative Medicine and Multiple Sclerosis*. New York: Demos Medical Publishing, Inc, 2001:118.

About the Author:



Ellen Guthrie has been a medical advisor with the Foundation since 2002. In that time, she has written numerous articles for MS Focus, answered hundreds of medications questions on the Doctor's Forum, and spoken on the 2003 Cruise for a Cause. Ellen is an Assistant Clinical Professor at the University of Georgia College of Pharmacy where she lectures primarily on MS. She has also lectured for the University of Florida College of Pharmacy. Currently Ellen practices pharmacy at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta where she is a pediatric pharmacist. She also writes for several medical journals and speaks and writes on MS issues whenever she can. She is particularly interested in area of Pediatric MS and is doing an upcoming Grand Rounds on the topic. Ellen received her doctorate of pharmacy degree from the University of Georgia College of Pharmacy in 1994, and was later employed at Egleston Children's Hospital at Emory University for five years. She is a member of the American Pharmaceutical Association, the Atlanta Academy of Institutional

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