

Nutrition Matters

Pregnant or Breastfeeding? Get the Facts on Herbal Teas and Natural Health Products

Herbs have been used for centuries to flavour our foods and to prevent or treat health problems. Most modern drugs originally come from plants. For example, the heart drug digoxin is made from Foxglove leaves. Morphine, a drug that relieves pain, is made from the Poppy flower.

Can Herbs and Natural Health Products Be Harmful?

Yes! Some herbs contain very strong, drug-like ingredients. A few can be ***poisonous and life-threatening***. For example, although some people claim that Ma Huang (also known as ephedrine) is helpful for weight loss, using Ma Huang could lead to death.

Health Canada has found that some natural health products have been ***contaminated*** with arsenic and mercury, or have contained drugs, such as steroids, hormones, diuretics and anti-inflammatories.

Another hazard is the risk of an ***allergic reaction***. Herbal products can contain a variety of allergens such as pollen, mould and mould spores. If you are allergic to plants or pollen, you need to be careful not to use products that contain any parts of the plants you are allergic to.

For advisories and warnings about specific drugs and health products, go to the following Health Canada website: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/tpd-dpt/index_advisories_e.html.



How Do I Know if An Herbal or Natural Health Product Has Been Approved for Use?

Health Canada has developed new regulations to ensure the quality, effectiveness and safety of natural health products. As of January 1, 2004, natural health products that have been approved under these regulations will have a Natural Product Number (NPN) or Drug Identification Number-Homeopathic Medicine (DIN-HM) on the label. There will also be useful product information on the label, such as what it should be used for, the recommended dosage, the length of time you should take it, the ingredients and any known risks associated with the product.

The regulations will be phased in over the next 2 to 6 years. During the transition period, products that are sold as drugs will continue to have a Drug Identification Number (DIN) which is issued when its safety has been approved by Health Canada. If a product does not have a NPN, DIN-HM or DIN, it has not been approved for use.



CAUTION - Always consult with your healthcare provider before taking any herbal or natural health products. There is not enough scientific information about the safety of various herbs and natural health products to recommend their general use during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

Are Herbal Products Safe to Use During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding?

Very few herbal products have been tested for their safety during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Just as you are careful about using drugs while you are pregnant or breastfeeding, you should be careful about using herbal products. Herbs can have drug-like effects and can be dangerous for you and your baby!

When you are pregnant, the active ingredients in some herbal products can:

- stimulate the uterus or cause uterine contractions
- act as a diuretic which can cause you to urinate often
- produce toxic effects on the developing baby
- cause birth defects



Some Common Herbs and Herbal Products **NOT** Recommended During PREGNANCY (This is *not* a complete list)

- Black and Blue Cohosh	- Gentian	- Pennyroyal
- Chamomile	- Ginseng	- Red Raspberry
- Devil's Claw	- Hawthorne	- Senna
- Dong Quai	- Licorice root	- Shepherd's Purse
- Ephedra	- Motherwort	- St. John's Wort
- Fenugreek	- Nettle	- Yarrow

Source: Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Oct. 2002

When you are breastfeeding:



Some herbal ingredients can be passed on to the baby through breast milk and harm the baby. Some people may use herbal products such as Fenugreek, Blessed Thistle, lecithin and Gentian Violet for some breastfeeding problems. There is not enough scientific information about the safety of various herbal products to recommend their general use during pregnancy or breastfeeding. Consult with your healthcare provider before you use any herbal or natural health products. He or she will help you identify the cause of the problem and suggest safe ways to prevent or treat the problem.

Are Any Herbal Teas Safe to Use During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding?

Herbal teas should not take the place of more nutritious drinks, such as milk and juice. According to Health Canada, the following herbal teas are generally considered safe to drink during pregnancy and breastfeeding if taken in moderation. A moderate amount would be no more than 2-3 cups of weak tea per day (1 cup = 250 ml). Some herbal teas contain a mixture of herbs. Read the label carefully to make sure the ingredients are only those listed below. Do not offer herbal teas or natural health products to your baby.



Herbal Teas Generally Considered **Safe** During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding If Taken in Moderation (no more than 2–3 cups/day)

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------|---------------|
| - Ginger | - Rose Hip | - Orange Peel |
| - Linden Flower* | - Lemon Balm | - Citrus Peel |

*Not recommended for people with heart conditions

Avoid Large Amounts of Caffeine

You should be aware that some herbal or flavoured teas contain caffeine. Large amounts of caffeine may be harmful to your baby. Other options include hot water with lemon, hot milk or hot apple juice. For more information on caffeine consumption during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, contact Toronto Public Health.

The Bottom Line

Before using any herbal teas or natural health products, check with your healthcare provider, a pharmacist, physician or dietitian, or call MotherRisk at the Hospital for Sick Children at 416-813-6780.

Reliable Websites on Natural Health Products:

Health Canada: Drugs and Health Products. [Http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/index_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodnatur/index_e.html)

Health Canada: Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy - National Guidelines for the Childbearing Years. [Http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/prenatal/national_guidelines-lignes_directrices_nationales-06g_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/nutrition/prenatal/national_guidelines-lignes_directrices_nationales-06g_e.html)

March of Dimes: During Your Pregnancy – Drugs and Herbs. <http://www.marchofdimes.com/pnhec/159.asp>

National Institutes of Health: Office of Dietary Supplements (U.S.). <http://ods.od.nih.gov/index.aspx>

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