

## Natural Health Products and Cancer Therapy

Complementary and alternative medical therapies can include natural health products, specialized diets, acupuncture, massage, exercises, psychological and mind-body therapies. Cancer Therapy generally refers to chemotherapy, radiation treatment and surgery.

**This information sheet only addresses *natural health products*.** Other complementary or alternative therapies should be discussed further with your doctor.

### **What are natural health products?**

Natural health products are vitamins, minerals, herbs and other supplements that you take on a regular basis as a natural medicine. They are sometimes taken in higher amounts than can be obtained through your diet. In general, natural health products are thought to be safe and non-toxic if taken as directed on the label.

### **Are there natural health products that I can take during treatment?**

- A regular strength multiple vitamin and mineral supplement is acceptable. Select a brand that is specific to your age group. The supplement should contain small doses of a wide variety of nutrients (high doses are not recommended).
- It is recommended that other natural health products not be used for one month following the completion of your treatment and where possible, for one month prior to starting treatment.

### **Why should I avoid taking natural health products during treatment?**

Chemotherapy drugs and radiation therapy attack cancer cells in a variety of complex ways. Cancer therapies are developed to maximize damage to the cancer cells while minimizing damage to the healthy cells. Natural health products could change this and prevent your treatment from achieving the desired effect, increase side effects of your treatment or interact with your therapy in a way that your doctor cannot predict.

Your doctor needs scientific proof to be sure that it is safe for you to take these products during cancer treatment. At present, these studies are not generally available and the safety or benefit of taking natural health products during cancer treatment is unknown.

However, taking natural health products is a personal choice and if you do decide to take these products with your cancer treatment, ***it is important you inform your doctor, pharmacist and nurse.***

Please contact your doctor, pharmacist, nurse or dietitian if further discussion is needed.

Reference:

1. Sparreboom A, Cox MC, Milin R et al. Herbal Remedies in the United States: Potential Adverse Interaction with Anticancer Drugs. *J Clin Oncol* 2004; 22:2489-2503.
2. Wilkinson S, Chodak GW. Critical Review of Complementary Therapies for Prostate Cancer. *J Clin Oncol* 2003; 21:2199-2210
3. Weiger QA, Smith M, Boon H, et al. Advising patients who seek complementary and alternative medical therapies for cancer. *Ann Intern Med* 2002;137:889-903.
4. Natural Health Products and Cancer Therapy. BCCA. Version 2003.