



SAFE USE OF NATURAL HEALTH PRODUCTS

The Issue

More Canadians are using natural health products (NHPs). Health Canada has developed new regulations that will help ensure that natural health products are well prepared, safe to use, effective and come with instructions on how they are to be used.

Background

Canadians are using natural health products in many forms, including herbal products, vitamin and mineral supplements, traditional Chinese, Ayurvedic and other traditional medicines, and homeopathic preparations. While the effectiveness of NHPs is often supported by traditional use and anecdotal reports, more frequently this initial evidence is being measured by contemporary medical science.

Most NHPs have enjoyed a long history of safe use, and many people take some form of a NHP on a daily basis. Individuals often select NHPs to gain more control over and positively influence their health. When used appropriately, NHPs can be an integral part of an individual's health management. However, some people assume that because a health product is labelled "natural," it is "safe." NHPs, like drugs, may have potentially serious side effects. Any substance, whether natural or synthetic, that has an effect on the body, has the potential to be a risk to health. Children, pregnant or breastfeeding women, seniors, those diagnosed with a serious disease or those scheduled for an operation are particularly susceptible to risk.

Health Canada has responded to concerns that consumers need to have access to products that are safe and effective, and to the information on how to best use them. After extensive consultations, new Natural Health Products Regulations were prepared, and apply to these products as of January 1, 2004. The regulations, which will be phased

in over the next two to six years, cover the way products are manufactured and brought to market, and the information that is on the label. Natural health products that have been approved under these regulations will either have a NPN or DIN-HM on the label (Natural Product Number or Drug Identification Number- Homeopathic Medicine). A NPN or DIN-HM lets the user know that the product has undergone and passed a review of its formulation, labelling and instructions for use.

With the new regulations in place, manufacturers will label their natural health products with useful information such as what it should be used for, the recommended dosage, the length of time you should take it, the ingredients, any known risk factors associated with the product and other information.

The Possible Health Risks To Consider

When people use self-selected health products, whether conventional medicines or NHPs, there are possible side effects or risks that must be considered. Some of these are as follows:

- taking a product for a self-diagnosed condition that may be serious
- absence or delay in receiving effective supervised treatment for a medical condition
- interaction with prescription drugs, over-the-counter medicines, or other herbal products, which can result in other drugs having reduced or enhanced effects, including side effects or overdose
- allergic reactions



With NHPs, there are additional aspects to consider, such as the possibility that a plant species may have been misidentified, that the amount of an ingredient may vary from that stated on the label or between batches, or that the health-related claims may not be appropriate for the ingredients. The new regulations are intended to address these risks.

Minimizing Your Risk

Natural health products can have potent effects on the body. While the intent is for positive health effects, there is also the potential for side effects. Therefore, before you take any self-selected or over-the-counter product, including a natural health product, you should take steps to be sure it is the correct product for you. You may wish to ask yourself some of the following questions:

- Why would I take this product?
- What are the benefits or results that I am seeking from taking this product?
- Is this the best product or approach to achieve those results, or are there better alternatives?
- What is the evidence that supports the safety and effectiveness of this product?
- What are the risks associated with taking this product?

If you are unsure of the answers, or uncomfortable with your understanding of some of the issues, you should talk to a health care professional, such as your doctor, pharmacist, or complementary/alternative health care provider.

You can reduce your risk of adverse effects by taking the following steps:

- Tell your doctor what you are taking and why.

- Use products that are approved. Look for a DIN, NPN or DIN-HM on the label.
- Be sceptical about health-related claims for potentially serious conditions. Consult your doctor about the appropriate use of these products. Do not rely on company advertisements or package information.
- Be aware of any reaction or interactions with other drugs you are taking. Report any adverse reaction to your doctor.
- Consult your health care provider before giving a natural health product to a child.
- Consult your health care provider before taking a health product if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, if you are a senior, have been diagnosed with a serious disease or significant previously diagnosed medical condition, or are scheduled for an operation.

You are encouraged to report any adverse reaction or interaction involving any health product you take, including natural health products, other over the-counter drugs, or prescription medications, to the toll-free number given in the Need More Info? section.

Health Canada's Role

The Natural Health Products Directorate (NHPD) of Health Canada has developed regulations to ensure that all Canadians have ready access to natural health products that are safe, effective and of high quality, while respecting freedom of choice and philosophical and cultural diversity. The NHP Regulations require that NHP health claims be supported by specific standards, and that products are made according to good manufacturing practices in licensed facilities.

Need More Info?

More information on natural health products, the new NHP Regulations, and guidance on interpreting and using this information can be found on the Natural Health Products Directorate Web site:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/nhpd-dpsn/index_e.html

To report any adverse reaction or interaction involving any health product, including NHPs, contact Health Canada at this toll-free number (866)234 2345 or by fax at (866) 678-6789, or contact your Regional Adverse Drug Reaction (ADR) Centre
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/tpd-dpt/adr_regions_e.html

Any suspected adverse reactions can also be reported to:
Canadian Adverse Drug Reaction Monitoring Program (CADRMP)
Marketed Health Products Directorate
Health Canada
Address Locator: 0701C
OTTAWA, Ontario K1A 0L2
Tel: (613) 957-0337
or Fax: (613) 957-0335

Information on reporting adverse reactions can be obtained from the following Web site:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/tpd-dpt/index_adverse_report_e.html

Additional It's Your Health articles can be found at:
www.healthcanada.ca/iyh
You can also call (613) 957-2991