Are Natural Cures A Prescription for Danger?

You're tired? Stressed? Maybe a few pounds overweight? Before you reach for one of those herbal remedies everyone is buzzing about, read our startling report.

by Mark Teich and Pamela Weintraub

Walk into your local pharmacy. There, next to the shampoo and before the toothpaste, is a prominent display of an herbal weight-loss tea. Elsewhere in this otherwise ordinary drugstore—the same one where you fill your children's prescriptions for antibiotics and stock up on Band-Aids—you find botanical cold remedies, natural sleeping aids, mysteriously named energy boosters. The supplement shelves are decked with exotic amino acid capsules, superpotent megavitamins, and high-tech cocktails containing dozens of ingredients.

Natural remedies have gone mainstream. Once relegated to dusty, out-of-the-way health food stores, they can be found today in drugstore chains, supermarkets, discount department stores. Health food stores even look like Wal-Marts—bright, modern emporiums sprinkled throughout suburban malls.

Given how commonplace they now seem, not to mention the enthusiastic endorsements they inspire, it's easy to assume natural remedies have proved their worth and safety. Yet the standards of proof for the safety and effectiveness of supplements are not as high as those for drugs.

More alarming, illnesses—and deaths—caused by herbs, nutritional "boosters," amino acids, and other "health" products have grown about as fast as the supplement industry itself. And with *fewer* legal controls in place today than just a few years ago, the result is an out-of-control situation that promises to grow more dangerous. Vigilance, says Rossanne Philen, M.D., a medical epidemiologist at the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is a consumer's best (and maybe only) protection.

Nature's Bounty, Nature's Wrath

Few experts dispute that some supplements offer tempting benefits. The Chinese herb ma huang, for example, is widely accepted as an energy booster. Willow bark has been known to ease aches and pains and reduce fever and inflammation. But unlike the Food and Drug Administration–approved versions of these herbs' "miracle" ingredients—ephedrine and aspirin, respectively—they have not undergone large clinical studies to verify purity and safety or to pinpoint the right dosage for consumers. Using them is a complete crapshoot.

"There appears to be a general assumption that because these products are natural, that means they're also safe," says Lori A. Love, M.D., Ph.D., director of clinical research and review staff in the FDA's Office of Special Nutritionals. "That is not necessarily true. Arsenic and strychnine are also natural substances. And even if a substance is okay at a lower dose, it doesn't mean it's safe at a higher one or with chronic use."

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE BRONSTEIN

Remedies to Beware

Although still on the market, these products have been deemed potentially dangerous by the FDA:

• GERMANDER, an herb often found in medicinal teas, elixirs, and tablets, is marketed for weight loss. Banned by the French Ministry of Health, germander has been associated with acute nonviral hepatitis; one case resulted in death.

• YOHIMBE, a tree bark marketed for bodybuilding and virility. It contains a variety of pharmacologically active chemicals, in particular yohimbine, which dilates the body's veins and arteries, thus lowering blood pressure. Yohimbe has been associated with kidney failure, seizures, paralysis, and death.

• LOBELIA, also known as Indian tobacco, is similar to nicotine. In high doses it produces respiratory depression, sweating, rapid heartbeat, coma, and, ultimately, death.

• CHROMIUM PICOLINATE, sold for weight loss and to accelerate fat metabolism. Associated with flushing, nervousness, cardiac palpitations, and hepatitis.

• PHENYLALANINE, an amino acid marketed for pain relief, arthritis, mental alertness, and appetite suppression. Recently associated, like L-tryptophan, with eosinophilia myalgia syndrome.

• MA HUANG (EPHEDRA), widely known to be an amphetamine-like stimulant containing ephedrine. Found in diet pills, pep pills, and cold remedies, this herb can elevate blood pressure. Has also been linked to sudden death.

• JIN BU HUAN, a Chinese herbal remedy sold for pain relief and insomnia. The herb is 36 percent tetrahydropalmatine (THP), which has produced side effects from shortness of breath to paralysis, and has been linked to toxic hepatitis.

The lack of accurate dosage information and the difficulty of knowing what's really in any particular package make even apparently benign products suspect. Take echinacea, the popular botanical remedy for colds and flu. Advocates point to the many scientific European studies that show how well and how safely the herb works, and to its widespread use among mainstream doctors in Germany. "There are more than 180 conventional medicines made from echinacea in Germany," says Mark Blumenthal, executive director of the American Botanical Council in Austin, Texas. "They are sold in pharmacies, recommended by pharmacists and physicians, and medicinal claims for them are approved by the German government."

Some of the foreign research may be legitimate, agrees Dr. Philen. "But in Europe many of these products are prescribed by doctors who monitor doses precisely and regularly check for any side effects." A consumer walking into a health food store or pharmacy in Boston or Los Angeles has no such protection.

Nor do most herbal products provide warnings*(continued on page 111)*

Natural Cures

(continued from page 89)
about potential dangers. For example, willow bark, like its synthetic cousin aspirin, could lead to the deadly Reye's syndrome when taken by children suffering from chicken pox or flu. But no mention of contraindications appears on most labels. The same goes for the stimulant ma huang; for those with hypertension, the herb can elevate blood pressure even more.

Promise Them Anything

In 1993 the FDA dispatched agents to 129 health food stores around the country to investigate unsubstantiated claims about the curative effects of natural supplements. Posing as customers, the agents asked for treatments for infections, high blood pressure, or cancer. In 120 stores, clerks recommended specific products, including shark cartilage and honeysuckle tea, to cure cancer. The agents were also told of "miracle cures" for bone marrow diseases, diabetes, arthritis, depression, herpes, and countless other conditions. In Kent, Washington, one agent was given a tea blend to cure his supposed throat cancer but was warned by the clerk that acne might erupt while the tea was "getting rid of toxins" in his body.

"The danger," says Victor Herbert, M.D., professor of medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, "comes when people who are really ill use these fraudulent or bogus treatments instead of cures and therapies that are proven to work."

Some of the most outrageous claims are for amino acids, the building blocks of protein, which are now recommended in supplement form to boost immunity and memory, lift depression, eliminate allergies and insomnia...you name it. But Dr. Herbert says that no research has been able to prove amino acids are effective in supplement form.

And they could be dangerous: "Single amino acid supplements can produce an imbalance in the amount of amino acids in the blood and prevent critical, food-derived amino acids from being absorbed in the proper amounts," he says.

Means of Misinformation

Despite such risks, the more than $3-billion-a-year supplement industry recently gained even greater leeway with the passage of the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act last year. Spearheaded by Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah, where supplements are a major industry, and Representative Bill Richardson, a Democrat from New Mexico, this new law allows manufacturers to call products with no nutritive value "dietary supplements." Manufacturers can also make certain claims on the labels without premarket FDA approval. Although pharmaceutical manufacturers must prove that a product is safe before bringing it to market, supplement sellers face no such obligation.

If the labels don't hook you, salespeople with no medical or nutritional training may, by embellishing claims and recommending particular regimens. "Clerks in the health food store often have less training than the person behind the cosmetics counter. Yet they're recommending cures for medical conditions, not lipsticks," says Dr. Philen.

A favorite strategy of sales clerks is to direct consumers to the "reference section," typically racks and racks of magazines, newsletters, and books. "The supplement industry maintains a never-ending flow of information," says Stephen Barrett, M.D., a psychiatrist in Allentown, *(continued on page 112)*

Natural Cures

(continued from page 111)

Pennsylvania, and a prominent consumer advocate. At last count, he says, there were 12 "quack" health programs on the radio in the New York metropolitan area alone. Add to that TV, with its stream of supplement infomercials, and ginseng begins to sound as familiar as ginger ale.

The information superhighway has also gotten into the act, with supplement salespeople pitching their wares on-line. One cyberspace opportunist who urged the weary to "E-mail me for more info!!!" recently advertised a product "great for males—increases stamina, strength, endurance, muscle stamina—and in small doses helps menstrual problems, and gives energy."

Supplement Self-Defense

With all the sources of misinformation, can you use supplements for the good they might impart and avoid the bad? Yes, if you're careful. One no-brainer is to avoid those products that have been associated with debilitating illness or death, such as the infamous ma huang and germander, a seemingly innocuous ingredient in teas that has been linked to hepatitis. (See "Remedies to Beware," page 89.)

Watch, especially, for dangerous substances that the government has outlawed or the supplement industry has withdrawn voluntarily, urges Dr. Philen. These include chaparral, which has been linked to liver and kidney damage, comfrey, also associated with liver damage, some of which has proved fatal, and the amino acid L-tryptophan, linked to at least 38 deaths and more than 1,500 injuries from a connective tissue disorder known as eosinophilia myalgia syndrome. "If you have obtained this product through any source, throw it out or bring *(continued on page 114)*

Shopping for Cures: The Hope and the Hype

What kind of prescribing and cautionary information do consumers receive when they purchase the often potent products found in health food stores? To find out, *Redbook* sent women to their local shops, then asked Victor Herbert, M.D., scientific editor of *Total Nutrition: From the Mount Sinai School of Medicine*, how our shoppers might fare.

LAGUNA HILLS, CALIFORNIA
Shopper Age 32, financial analyst.
Complaint "Stress due to problems at work and home." Also asked about the quickest way to lose weight.
Type of Store Nutrition/vitamin store.
Recommendations A nutritional-supplement pack, containing four pills: an essential B-complex vitamin, a pill with 12 antioxidants, a megadose of vitamin C, and an extra-strength, super-multimineral pill. Also suggested chromium picolinate for quick weight loss.
Cautions Clerk pointed out that vitamins and minerals "are to be used to accent the way you treat your body, not as a crutch."
What the Expert Says No vitamin or herb is a magic bullet for stress. Plus at high doses, vitamins can act like drugs, causing severe side effects. As for the chromium picolinate, there's no evidence it produces weight loss, quick or slow.

TEMPE, ARIZONA
Shopper Age 33, nurse.
Complaint "I'm tired, really fatigued."
Type of Store Local food co-op.
Recommendations Siberian ginseng, a mixture containing, in addition to the herb, pure grain alcohol (30 to 40 percent). When asked why this brand was best, the clerk said it was the "maceration strength."
Cautions None about the product, though salesperson did point out that stress can have different causes.
What the Expert Says The store should have a liquor license to sell this. The alcohol content is equivalent to 60 to 80 proof. That's enough to make you drunk.

BIRMINGHAM, MICHIGAN
Shopper Age 41, reporter.
Complaints "Feeling low, peaked."
Type of Store A small, independently owned grocery and health food shop.
Recommendations Siberian ginseng, with vitamin B from plant sources and capsicum fruit concentrates. "This is best for women because of the mixture of ingredients and the type of ginseng. It works by stimulating the female hormonal system."
Cautions Told customer not to exceed recommended dosage. Also steered her away from chromium picolinate and pep pills ("They're very stimulating").
What the Expert Says Studies have shown many so-called ginseng products actually contain little or none of the herb. But that could be good news, since some ginseng products can produce symptoms resembling estrogen- or steroid-poisoning.

Natural Cures

(continued from page 112)
it back," Dr. Philen warns. "There is no safe source of L-tryptophan."

Also take care not to mix products. Since you cannot always be sure of the ingredients, you could deal yourself a lethal dose. It's smart, too, to take the lowest recommended dose, says Dr. Philen. Use the product for a week or two at most, and if any medical problems crop up, consult a doctor right away.

Even with vitamins, "if the dose is too high, they start acting like drugs," says Dr. Herbert. Niacin, vitamin A, vitamin B_6, and selenium are particularly toxic in large quantities.

Finally, the best advice for those taking a walk on the supplement side is, be skeptical. Remember, snake venom is a natural product. And although you might not see it on store shelves, you'll certainly see plenty of snake oil. □

Sex Boosters: What Health Food Stores Are Telling (and Selling) Your Husband

The advertisements suggest romance—a couple embracing perhaps—but there's little question that "virility" products are sold as aphrodisiacs (to rouse libido) and sex enhancers (to produce firmer erections and prolong lovemaking). And they're big business. But unlike the enthusiastic pitches customers typically hear for other products, the endorsements for sex aids are brief and generally secondhand ("A lot of men take that"). Nonetheless, our shoppers didn't leave empty-handed. What they bought, and what they might expect, from Victor Herbert, M.D., scientific editor of *Total Nutrition: From the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.*

HUNTINGTON, NEW YORK
Shopper Age 32, electrician.
Request "An aphrodisiac."
Recommendations A product containing yohimbe bark extract, along with Korean red ginseng, capsicum, vitamin E, and amino acids.
Salesperson's Comments "Yohimbe has a strong reputation as a libido enhancer. It's good stuff—also helps with overall energy."
Cost $19.99 for 70 tablets.
What the Expert Says Studies in rats show that in small doses yohimbe does increase sexual arousal, but there's not enough evidence to say how it affects humans, sexually speaking. But we do know it's dangerous. It dilates blood vessels and lowers blood pressure. It can also have negative psychological effects.

WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS
Shopper Age 41, college administrator.
Request "Something for sexual potency."
Recommendations Arsenicum Album, a homeopathic remedy.
Salesperson's Comments Although label indicated product "temporarily relieves extreme chilliness, restlessness, and exhaustion upon slightest effort, occurring with a cold or flu," clerk briefly checked a homeopathic guide and said product would help.
COST $5.36 for 100 tablets.
What the Expert Says Arsenic was the original homeopathic medicine. Because of its natural presence in seaweed, people thought it must be good for them. Although the arsenic here wouldn't be a problem—it's probably diluted to a molecule of arsenic per ten bottles—the product is pure fraud. Basically, they're selling water.

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE
Shopper Age 28, medical student.
Request "Something to put a little more oomph in my sex life."
Recommendations Pure yohimbe extract.
Salesperson's Comments Asked how the product works, the clerk checked a book and reported that it said "something about dilation of blood vessels in mucous membranes and skin, leading to engorgement of genitals and decreased blood pressure." Also added, delicately, that she "knew a couple of women who weren't feeling too, um, amorous toward their husbands, and they said yohimbe worked."
Cost $19.99 for 50 capsules.
What the Expert Says The clerk probably wasn't a crook. Most of the salespeople in health food stores are either ignorant or misinformed; they simply pass along what they're told by their wholesalers. But no matter what the claims, yohimbe isn't safe for self-treatment.

Little Girl Lost

(continued from page 69)
Olympics no longer seemed important." But she continued at Fong's gym for a time and says she cringed when she watched Julissa do the Yurchenko in practice. "She was always real close to the end of the board. And she had a weird approach. I remember once or twice she missed the end of the board."

Fong saw Julissa's flaws too, later testifying that he had noticed her poor technique at competitions when she was still with Karolyi. She wasn't landing within the safety zone of the springboard. So Fong tinkered with her approach and her round-off and felt so confident of her progress he accepted an invitation for her to compete at the World Sports Fair in Japan just three months after she arrived in Missouri. But first there was a meet in South Dakota the weekend before she was to leave for Tokyo. Julissa begged her mother to come.

"I'm going to be seeing you in two weeks," Otilia told her. "By the time you get back from Japan, I'll be in Missouri."

"But I want you to come," Julissa pleaded.

At such a late date Otilia couldn't get a decent airfare, but she caved in. She flew to Kansas City, then she and Ramiro drove eight hours to South Dakota. Julissa did well, especially in the vault. She scored a 9.7 on her Yurchenko.

That night Julissa stayed in her parents' hotel room. As she often did at home, she got into bed with her mother, leaving her father to sleep alone. Otilia and Julissa flipped through magazines, looking at clothes and hairstyles, laughing and talking. The family spent part of the next day together, then Otilia and Ramiro took their daughter back to the team's hotel. Julissa said good-bye to her parents four times.

On the drive back, Otilia smiled. "I feel so good having seen her," she said to Ramiro.

OF THE 200 OR SO GYMNASTS WHO COMpete on the elite level every year, only 20 make the national team. Only 6 of those compete in the Olympics. A gymnast's elite career usually lasts for five or six years, generally from age 12 to age 18. Some go on to college gymnastics, a more forgiving environment. *(continued on page 116)*