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Herbs, Vitamins and Pharmaceuticals: working together safely

1. **Safety First!** Most herbs and vitamins are quite safe on their own, and generally adverse events are very few. Deaths are extremely rare. Combining herbs with pharmaceutical drugs provides the greatest potential risk.
2. **Some herbs are inherently toxic.** Alkaloids in plants such as **Comfrey, Coltsfoot, Butterbur, Borage** can damage the liver if taken in large quantities. Other alkaloids, like those in **Ephedra**, can dangerously raise blood pressure. Others still can cause nausea, like **Ipecac** and **Lobelia**. Some folks have allergies to certain plants as well – such as an allergy to members of the **Composite** family (plants like Echinacea and Chamomile); allergy to **salicylates** (aspirin, Meadowsweet, Willow barks).
3. Plant interactions with specific body systems:
 - a. Kidney and Renal: Irritating metabolites like **Juniper, Uva Ursi, Buchu**; Oxalate-containing plants like **Rhubarb, Sorrel, Yellowdock** (stones); Plants that affect electrolyte balance like **Licorice**.
 - b. Hematologic (blood): Blood clotting is inhibited by plants like **Ginger, Turmeric, Garlic, Medicinal Mushrooms, Bromelain**; the effect of anticoagulants like Coumadin (Warfarin) is increased by **Horse chestnut, Sweet clovers, Bedstraw, Woodruff, Vanilla**; and decreased by plants high in Vitamin K like **Alfalfa, broccoli, kale, chard, brussel sprouts, Parsley, Spinach, Nettles**.
 - c. Cardiovascular: blood pressure can be raised by plants like **Ephedra, Siberian Ginseng, Licorice, Rhodiola**; it can be unduly lowered, especially if a prescription blood pressure medicine is also taken, by plants like **Valerian, Crampbark, Ginkgo, Rauwolfia**; and **Lily-of-the-Valley** interacts with cardiac pharmaceuticals like digoxin (digitalis).
 - d. Neuronal: Medications like MAOIs (monoamine oxidase inhibitors), SSRIs (antidepressants like Prozac or Zoloft, Paxil), and other antidepressants interact directly with **St. John's Wort** and should not be used at the same time.
 - e. Digestive: Some herbs can cause nausea or upset stomach. This is rare; generally, they are powerful herbs that stimulate elimination and fight infection, like **Iris, Pokeweed, Lobelia**. Other plants may upset the stomach if taken with medications and without food; take herbs with meals if this is a problem.
 - f. Immune system: There is some theoretical speculation that certain immune-stimulating plants like **Echinacea** can aggravate autoimmune conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, HIV/AIDS, thyroid disease, or Chron's disease. I have found this to be a rare event, although it is true that Echinacea just isn't right for some folks. Try Astragalus instead, which is incredibly safe and gentle, and works better as a preventative for colds and flus.

- g. Blood sugar balance: Generally, herbs are safe to take alongside oral hypoglycemic medications. For insulin-dependent diabetes, caution and supervision are advised if trying herbs like **Bitter Melon, Gymnema, Ginseng, Andrographis** or supplements containing **Chromium** until their effects on blood sugar in your individual case are determined.
 - h. Liver metabolism. In cases of liver and gallbladder disease (jaundice, cirrhosis, hepatitis, gallstones, bile duct obstruction) one should be very cautious in using bile-stimulating plants like **Dandelion, Celandine, Milk Thistle, Artichoke, Yellowdock, Burdock**. Additionally, for anyone (even without liver disease), herbs share many of the metabolic channels that drugs use, and can therefore increase or decrease the effectiveness of the pharmaceuticals. This occurs primarily through the liver's cytochrome P-450 enzyme system, a complex family of metabolic enzymes that are constantly filtering our blood. Drugs such as antihistamines, birth control medicines, blood pressure regulators, antidepressants, tranquilizers, statins (Lipitor, e.g.), anti-inflammatories (like Tylenol) can be affected by herbs through these enzyme pathways. INHIBITORS generally increase drug half-life and presence in the blood, potentially increasing primary and side effects; examples include **Grapefruit and citruses, Garlic, Red Wine, Parsley, Angelica, Dong Quai, Ginkgo, Kava-Kava**. ACTIVATORS decrease drug half-life and presence in the blood, reducing the effectiveness of the medication (generally); examples include **St. John's Wort**.
4. Beneficial interactions. Not all herb-vitamin-drug interactions are harmful! Often herbs can be used alongside drugs to buffer some of the side effects:
- a. Chemotherapy: nausea is alleviated by **Ginger**; loss of appetite is helped by **digestive Bitters**; low blood counts (white / red blood cells) can be buffered by taking herbs such as **Astragalus, Siberian Ginseng, Rehmannia**.
 - b. Sexual side effects of medications such as antidepressants respond well to **Ginkgo**.
 - c. Many drugs are damaging on the liver, especially if taken for prolonged periods of time. Here, a simple remedy like **Milk Thistle** can be extremely supportive and reduce overall side-effects from the medication.

The above are general points of information and suggestions only. Please discuss any herbs or supplements you are taking with your doctor; if you want to know more about herbal medicines and are curious about their safety in your specific condition, consult with a qualified herbalist.