



BC Cancer Agency

CARE & RESEARCH

An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

Natural Health Products and Breast Cancer

These recommendations provide guidance on the safety of using natural health products. This is a controversial area because of the limited amount of scientific information that exists at this time. Please contact your doctor, pharmacist, nurse or dietitian for further discussion.

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 as opposed to use as a food. Sometimes they are taken in higher amounts than can be obtained through your diet.

Is there a recommended vitamin and mineral supplement?

A **once daily vitamin and mineral supplement** may be useful if you are unable to eat a balanced diet. A supplement should contain small doses of a wide variety of nutrients (large doses are not recommended). Select a brand that is specific to your age group. For example, brands containing iron are recommended for women who have regular menstrual periods.

Is it safe to use natural health products during chemotherapy or radiation treatments?

There is concern about supplements affecting your treatments. Therefore, natural health products are **not recommended** during chemotherapy or radiation treatments with your cancer doctor.

In general, many natural health products may be safe and non-toxic when used as directed on the label. However, at this time, the safety of using them during treatment is not known.

Are there natural health products that I can use for hot flashes?

Most natural health products used for hot flashes (eg. black cohosh, red clover) contain hormones. Hormones may stimulate breast cancer growth or affect hormonal treatments such as tamoxifen. These are not recommended outside of a clinical trial or without discussion with your cancer doctor as their safety in breast cancer is not known, especially if your breast cancer is sensitive to hormones such as estrogen.

There are some natural health products that have shown limited benefit in reducing hot flushes. If you decide to use natural health products that contain hormones, use the lowest effective dose for a limited time (that is, weeks rather than months or years). Ongoing studies of both natural and synthetic hormonal agents are expected to provide more information over the next few years.

What natural health products contain hormones?

The following products (pills, powders, teas, etc.) are known to contain hormones in a variety of doses and formulations. Check the product label carefully as some products may contain a combination of ingredients from the list below. Other products also may contain hormones but may not have been tested.

Products that contain hormones		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African Wild Potato • Aletris • Alfalfa • Androstenedione • Anise • Beta-sitosterols • Bitter melon • Black cohosh • Blue Cohosh • Boron • Chasteberry • Chrysin • DHEA • Dong quai • Evening Primrose Oil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fennel • Flaxseed • Flor*Essence® (contains red clover) • Genistein (combined polysaccharide) • Ginseng (all types) • Guggul • Hops • Ipriflavone • Kudzu • Licorice • Milk Thistle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motherwort • Panax (pseudo ginseng) • Pleurisy root • Pomegranate seeds • Raspberry leaf • Red clover • Resveratrol • Scarlet pimpernel • Sage • Soy supplements • Star Anise • Wild carrot • Wild yam

Should I be careful about the food I eat?

Food sources containing the above substances, including fruits and vegetables, do not need to be restricted during cancer treatment.

The potential benefits and risks of foods such as flax and soy, which contain plant estrogens, are not well known at this time.

For more information on diet, please consult with a registered dietitian at your cancer treatment centre.

Recommended Resource:

Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database (www.naturaldatabase.com)
Access is by the Internet at your regional BC Cancer Agency centre library for free or privately for a user fee. The Database is also available as a book (to order, call 1-209-472-2244).