

Learning Portal Lite: Alternative medicine

This is a one-page summary; see the [full version online](#)

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) includes many beliefs and therapies, but we look briefly at the safety of herbal products, homeopathy, and dietary supplements.

Safety concerns

Reliable information about efficacy or safety may be lacking in many cases, or is suggested only from small scale studies or case reports. Yet certain herbal and dietary products can pose significant risk of harm. The quality of some products may be open to doubt because of, for example, poor manufacturing practice or adulteration.

Herbal products

These are made from plants and are often given orally. They can cause dose-related side effects and allergy, as well as interactions. Whether an interaction will occur or not is often difficult to determine, but some herbal products can affect cytochrome p450 enzymes, and may have side effects that are additive to a patient's conventional medicines or oppose them.

Homeopathy products

Very dilute concentrations of (usually) plant-based compounds that are unlikely to have safety implications in practice if prepared correctly.

Dietary supplements

These are usually food constituents taken to supplement the diet such as vitamins, amino acids, and co-enzymes. They can cause side effects and sometimes interactions.

Questions to ask

When advising about safety, your questions will be those required for managing an adverse reaction or an interaction, but you also may want to ask general questions such as:

- What is the product and what does it contain?
- Why does the patient want to take it?
- Where did they get it from?

Information sources

These include the Natural Medicines Database (subscription needed) and the Memorial Sloan Kettering website (free).