

1. Interactions with conventional medicines

A patient calls your hospital's medicines helpline to ask if they can start taking 'agnus castus'. They have recently been discharged from hospital with a new prescription for rivaroxaban.

Suggested questions to ask include:

(a) Did they have a specific product in mind?

Identifying the specific product can help you to check whether it contains other ingredients, and the dose of agnus castus.

(b) Why were they admitted to hospital and do they have any other significant health problems?

To check whether agnus castus may pose any safety concerns to the patient. You'll want to know why the patient is taking rivaroxaban, for example.

(c) Is the patient on any other conventional or alternative medicines?

To investigate any potential drug interactions.

(d) What is the indication for the agnus castus?

Is this for a self-limiting condition, or a more serious problem? Maybe they would benefit from speaking to a healthcare professional such as their GP first.

Suggested Sources:

- The Sloan Kettering website, Natural Medicines Database, Herbal Medicines, or Stockley's Herbal Medicines Interactions if you have access.
- There is a Medicines Q&A on the SPS website about the safety of taking herbal medicines with NOACs

2. Adverse reactions to alternative medicines

A neurology consultant asks you on a ward round if a herbal slimming aid may have caused a patient's subarachnoid haemorrhage.

Suggested questions to ask include:

(a) What is the name of the slimming product?

To identify the product ingredient(s).

(b) When did the patient start taking the product?

(c) What dose has the patient been taking?

Depending upon the clinical condition of the patient, it may be difficult to gather an accurate history, but details about the dose and timing can help you to assess the likelihood of this product causing the patient's haemorrhage.

(d) Is the patient taking any other alternative or conventional medicines? Have any of these been started recently?

To enable you to assess whether there may have been other potential causes for the patient's haemorrhage, or whether the bleed may have been due to an interaction.

(e) Does the patient have other significant medical conditions such as renal or liver disease? Do they have any allergies?

These are predisposing factors to developing adverse reactions in general, and may help you to judge whether the slimming product may have been responsible for the bleed.

Suggested Sources:

- The product manufacturer's website, the Natural Medicines Database, Herbal Medicines, Martindale, and Embase and/or Medline.



3. Buying online

A Macmillan nurse rings you in the dispensary to ask whether it's safe for a patient to take a product containing apricot kernels. The patient has bought some online and the nurse is worried about interactions with their chemotherapy.

Suggested questions to ask include:

(a) What specific product has the patient bought, and who was the supplier?

There are a number of products advertised online and you need to identify the exact compound(s) that the patient is planning to take.

(b) Has the patient taken any of the product already, or do they intend to start taking it?

This will help you to determine the urgency of the question and whether the patient has experienced any problems so far.

(c) What chemotherapy regime are they having? What other medicines are they taking?

To enable you to search for potential interactions

(d) What is the patient's medical history?

To check on contraindications and precautions.

(e) Why does the patient want to take apricot kernels?

To review the evidence base for the indication. Maybe the supplier is making unsupported claims about the product. It's important that the patient can make an informed choice.

Suggested Sources:

- The product manufacturer's or supplier's website.
- Sloan Kettering website, Natural Medicines Database, Stockley's Herbal Medicines Interactions, Embase and/or Medline.
- There is a Medicines Q&A on the SPS website about the safety of taking herbal medicines with cancer chemotherapy.