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Complimentary and Alternative Medicine Michael R. Lyles M.D.

One –third of Americans in the 2002 NIH National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine survey reported using prayer and natural herbal, botanical and dietary supplements to address their problems (www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad343.pdf). Prayer was the most commonly used “Complimentary and Alternative” treatment- endorsed by 67% of respondents. However a rigorous debate exists about safety and efficacy issues with “natural” agents. Studies have shown that many of these “natural” agents have pharmacological properties that can benefit a variety of medical disorders from cholesterol reduction (red yeast rice) to joint pain relief (chondroitin/glucosamine), while also having side effects and drug interaction issues. Many of my patients assume that an agent occurring in nature is inherently safe or at least safer until I remind them that digitalis came from a plant – along with a number of drugs of abuse. Thus it is necessary to have the same level of safety vigilance about these agents as we do for synthetic agents.

St. John’s Wort has been used to treat depression, with several studies having conflicting results about its efficacy. It is safe to say that it can be helpful for mild - moderate cases of depression, but other issues are significant. It can speed up the liver metabolism and clearance of birth control pills, causing them to lose contraceptive benefit. Anti-AIDS medications, xanax , sleeping pills, organ transplant medications and methadone are affected in the same way. Serotonin toxicity syndromes can occur if SJW is taken with antidepressants. Mania could be precipitated in bipolar patients taking SJW. Schizophrenic patients can have psychotic symptoms reemerge with SJW. Research has established the possibility of SJW having a MAO inhibitor type effect, causing some to recommend that patients on this agent adhere to a tyramine restricted diet. This is a point of confusion and active debate in the literature, as other studies have suggested that norepinephrine, serotonin, adrenal hormones and COMT enzymes may be affected by SJW and thus act as the basis for it’s mechanism of action. However the most severe side effect occurs when a depressed patient continues to take this product without benefit and their depression worsens. There should be a time limit of two months on any depression treatment –natural or not – after which a different approach/strategy should be tried. Withdrawal syndromes, characterized

by confusion, nausea, fatigue and insomnia have been reported with the abrupt cessation of SJW – so tapering is indicated.

Valerian Root is a plant with a long history of helping with sleep and anxiety. The mechanism of action is not clear but may involve increasing glutamate levels in the brain. It can take up to 4 weeks to work. Withdrawal syndromes characterized by anxiety, headache and mood-swings can occur with the abrupt cessation of use. The main side effects are headaches and residual sedation.

Kava Kava is used to treat anxiety and insomnia. The mechanisms of action include effects on MAO enzymes, GABA, skeletal muscle relaxation and the production of an anesthetic effect. This is the most unsafe of the “natural” treatments as it can inhibit the liver metabolism of any drug that the liver handles. The liver inhibiting effect is so pronounced that liver failure requiring transplantation has been reported. This has caused bans on the sale of this product in Europe and Canada. Liver effects can start within three weeks of initiating treatment.

Ginkgo biloba is used as a memory enhancer that acts by anticoagulant, free radical scavenging and antioxidant effects. In addition, it is felt to inhibit the deposition of beta amyloid that is central to some dementias. Studies in dementia patients have shown small improvements that took 4-12 weeks to become evident. We do not have controlled data on it's usage beyond one year. The major side effect is bleeding problems due to its anticoagulant effect. Taking this with aspirin therefore would be dangerous. Other representative drug interactions involve luvox, tagamet, prozac, dilantin and valium.

Finally Gingseng, Ma Hyuang and Ephedra are herbals that are used for energy. However they can cause irritability, increases in panic anxiety and raise blood pressure, especially in combination with ADHD medications. Ephedra was removed from the market in the U.S. because of cardiovascular concerns but patients may still get it on the internet from abroad. Thus we must be aware of the potential side effects of these treatments. For prayer, exercise and good diet are the only treatments without side effects. Then again, if you eat too much ocean salmon to get omega 3 fatty acids, you may get mercury exposed!