

Complementary medicine: Is it right for you?

The information herein was taken from a talk titled 'What Hope do Complementary Medicine Therapies Offer?' given by Carol Pontzer, PhD, at the SSF National Meeting in April 2003.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is becoming more and more widely known today; with as much as one third of the US population using some type of CAM practice or therapy. Herbal medicine is one of the most popular choices, and therefore it is becoming imperative to open the lines of communication between the patient and the physician so that the highest level of patient safety is maintained. Though there is often a level of hesitancy to tell one's doctor that something 'alternative' is being used, it is extremely important to do so to avoid the potential of negative interactions between these products and any pharmaceuticals the doctor may prescribe.

Another important point to remember is that there are a lot of herbal products out there and only some of them are actually effective, whether anecdotally or clinically proven to be so. Therefore, a high level of awareness and care should be taken in considering whether to try a particular product.

The following are a few that have been used in fairly recent clinical trials of Sjögren's Syndrome patients:

- **Longevity:** Used in Scandinavia since 1975, Longevity consists of a variety of herbs such as paprika, rosemary, peppermint, milfoil (yarrow), hawthorn, pumpkin seeds, and a large dose of vitamins. In a 1999, four month, double blind, randomised clinical trial, 40 patients were given this product and were evaluated on function and immune status. It's found that there was a significant increase in unstimulated salivary flow rates and a decrease in immune complex.

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- **Gamma linolenic acid:** This is an omega-6 fatty acid that can be extracted from evening primrose oil. It is also found in borage oil and black currant oil. Some researchers have looked at its mechanism of action. In some cases it was found that it is converted to anti-inflammatory prostaglandins, while in others it was found to interfere with early T-cell activation events, blocking CD 3-mediated T-cell signal transduction. However, it may take up to two months to see any benefit.

Trials in rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis patients found that it was effective at treating the fatigue associated

with these disorders. However, a 2002, six-month, double-blind, randomized clinical trial involving 90 Sjögren's Syndrome patients was not able to replicate these results.

- **Linseed extract:** Used as a salivary replacement and as a mouth rinse, in a relatively recent, double-blind, six-week trial (three-week treatment, three-week washout prior to treatment), Linseed extract was used to treat 22 patients. It was found to significantly reduce oral dryness and to decrease speaking problems and burning mouth. It is important to note that this study was done by the manufacturers of the product, so this may or may not have had an influence on the outcome.

In general, when researching a product or therapy of any kind, it is important to look at who is doing the studies on it and where the information on it is coming from. These factors may have an impact on actual efficacy versus implied, but false, efficacy put forth by a less than reputable business or person.

Safety is a concern with prescribed medications as well as with herbal medicines. With herbal products, there is a commonly held belief that because a herb is 'natural', it is therefore safe. However, there are many things in nature that can be dangerous or deadly and, as can happen with prescription drugs, some people may have allergic reactions to herbs. Potential users should be aware of this. Additionally, some herbal products may be contaminated with drugs or heavy metals, especially herbs that are imported directly from China. This does not mean that Chinese or other herbal medicines are inherently dangerous or that they should be avoided, only that it is important to get them from a reputable source known for product quality and safety.

In general, if one is conscientious in the use of herbal medicines, it is likely that they will be the recipient of the benefit rather than the negative consequence of its use. However, one should always consult with a healthcare professional to determine the best treatment, whether it is herbal, pharmaceutical or otherwise, and to make sure that potential interactions between all therapies are discovered before they can cause any harm.

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