

BOTANICAL (HERBAL) MEDICINE

Botanical medicine is the study and use of medicinal properties of plants. The use of plants as medicines predates written human history. Plants have the ability to synthesize a wide variety of chemical compounds that are used to defend against attack from insects, fungi and herbivorous animals. These chemicals, inherent in plants, have the ability to affect important biological functions. Since plants and humans have evolved and adapted to the changing environment over thousands of years, plant based medicines are often thought to be safe. The complex chemical nature of plants tend to render them to be relatively safe, since they affect not just one biochemical pathway, but often several, with multiple mechanisms of action. Despite botanical medicines safety record, herbal medicines are indeed medicine, and therefore have a potential for side effects. They also can react with other medications.

Chemicals found in plants are referred to as phytochemicals. Over 12,000 compounds have been isolated so far. In recent decades, herbal medicine has been an area of unprecedented study. Many herbal medications have been studied for identifying the active compounds and/or the mechanisms of action. More and more double-blind, placebo controlled studies are validating the benefits of herbal medicine.

Ginkgo biloba is an herbal medication that traditionally has been used in Asia for the treatment of Alzheimer's, dementia and other illnesses such as increasing circulation to the periphery. Although there have been many studies that have been published in Asia and Europe validating the effectiveness of this herbal medication, there were no North American double-blind, placebo controlled studies until one was published in the journal of the American Medical Association in 1997. In the study, 202 patients with Alzheimer's disease were given ginkgo biloba or a placebo for one year. Ginkgo not only stabilized Alzheimer's disease but also significantly improved mental function in 64% of the patients. There were no reported side effects.

Closer to home, Dr. Pierce from the University of Manitoba, conducted a 10 year study on the efficacy of ground flax as it relates to cardiovascular disease. The Canadian Centre for Agri-food Research in Health and Medicine is a research facility involving the U of Manitoba, St. Boniface Hospital and Agri-food Canada. The researchers found that consuming 3 heaping tablespoons (30 grams) of ground flax seed significantly reduced blood pressure, thereby possibly decreasing the incidence of stroke by as much as 50% and heart attack by about 30%.

Studies validating the benefits of herbal medication are being conducted in many of the most prestigious medical Universities in the world. The above are two examples of the benefits of plant based medicines.

The doctors at the Centre for Natural Medicine are trained in drug/herbal/nutrition contraindications.