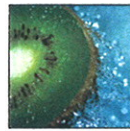


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Herbalists' cocktails should be banned, says new study

Dr Peter Canter's review of herbal medicines, published in the *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, found there was an almost total absence of evidence for any benefit from the tailored herbal cocktails — of up to 20 different herbs — prepared by herbalists, including traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic practitioners.

At least 1,000 herbalists are registered in the UK, but many more are unregistered, says Dr Canter of the Peninsula Medical School in Exeter. In fact, anyone can set themselves up as a herbalist.

Dr Canter's colleague Professor Edzard Ernst, renowned for his reservations about the efficacy of many herbal medicines, also has concerns about single herb extracts. Those that work for conditions including heart disease or depression are powerful medicines and could do damage by interacting with conventional drugs. They should only be prescribed by qualified medical practitioners, says Ernst.

"In my view, self-medication for serious conditions is out of the question," says Professor Ernst.

Canter says he is concerned about possible harm from individualised herbal medicine: "There are risks in the actual materials in the remedies. Some are inherently toxic herbs."

There have been "numerous cases" of banned toxic herbs such as aristoclia, which causes cancer, turning up in individualised herbal medicines, he said. There have been well-documented cases of Chinese herbal remedies containing prescription drugs or being polluted by agrochemicals. There was also a danger that some herbs in the cocktail could interact with drugs prescribed by a medical doctor. Further concerns are that herbalists are not trained to spot the signs of serious disease.

Dr Ann Walker PhD MNIMH MCPP RNutr, director of the British Herbal Medicines Association, told *HM*: "I think that these studies — three chosen for the systematic review — are not sufficient to base a conclusion that individualised herbal medicine does not work in general."

"In particular and concerning western phytotherapy — only one of the three studies reviewed was on western herbal medicine as we practice and this was not a properly powered study but rather a small, pilot, feasibility study of only 14 subjects which was designed to determine whether it was possible to undertake a randomised double blind controlled trial (RCT) in this field."

Western herbal medicine should not be grouped together with Chinese medicine which uses different diagnostic techniques and materia medica, argues Walker, and she states: "It is not scientific to base a conclusion on 'no effect' on this single pilot, feasibility study of the benefits of western herbal medicine."

Dr Robert Verkerk, executive director of Alliance For Natural Health, also questioned the small-scale nature of the studies, commenting: "Professor Ernst and his colleagues have done it again. It seems that they have wanted to find an excuse to can the practice of patient-specific herbal medicine, a healthcare approach that spans several millennia in different, often extremely

diverse, parts of the world.

"Guo, Canter and Ernst have entitled their paper: 'A Systematic Review Of Randomised Clinical Trials Of Individualised Herbal Medicine In Any Indication. You would be forgiven for thinking that this was a review of dozens or even hundreds of studies. But just three? Of the three papers, one ran for 16 weeks and involved IBS sufferers, another for just 10 weeks concerning patients with knee osteoarthritis and the final one covered durations between 12 weeks and six months, in the case of patients suffering breast or colon cancer. Can these three trials really be extrapolated to apply to 'any condition' and all forms of individualised herbal medicine? Of course not!"



Verkerk: critical of trials

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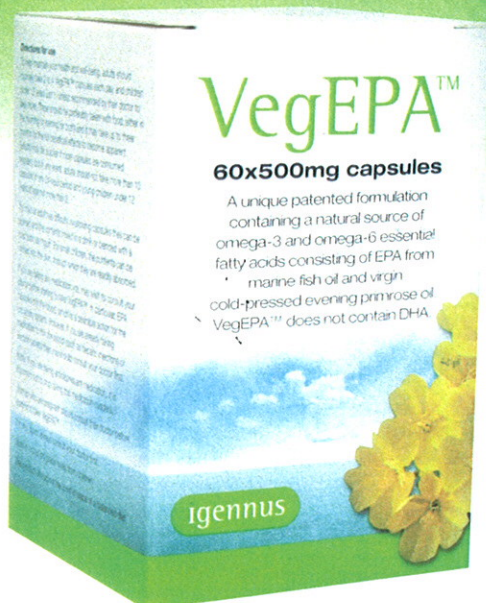
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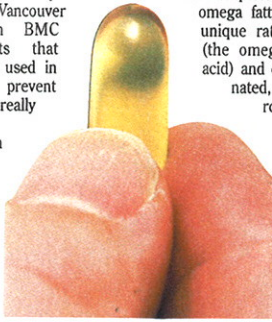
How women can look after their hearts through daily fish oil supplementation

A new study released by researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and published in BMC Medicine, suggests that aspirin — which is used in small doses to help prevent heart attacks — may really be a man's drug.

The Canadian researchers looked at 23 clinical trials involving more than 113,000 patients to study the effects of aspirin in heart attack prevention. They then analysed what impact the ratio of men to women in the trials had on the outcomes, and found that those involving mainly women failed to show that aspirin significantly reduced the risk of non-fatal heart attacks.

"We would caution clinicians on the prescribing of aspirin to women to women, especially for primary prevention of heart attack," said study author Dr Don Sin.

Women should consult their doctors to make sure that the benefits will outweigh the risks related to aspirin, he added. It is well established that consuming high levels of oily fish lowers the incidence of heart disease and several studies have confirmed that fish oils — eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) — are the protective components. There is also impressive evidence that they help to prevent atherosclerosis, lower blood pressure, reduce triglyceride levels, and are highly protective against both fatal and non-fatal heart attacks. Fish oils also have anti-rhythmic effects and help to prevent blood clotting.



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Garlic ingredient allicin is a lifesaver



A chemical that causes "garlic breath" can protect against high blood pressure and heart disease, new US research shows.

When garlic is eaten, the ingredient allicin breaks down into hydrogen sulphide, which produces a pungent smell from the breath and skin. But the compound also causes the blood vessel walls to dilate, which reduces blood pressure — explaining the well known health benefits of eating garlic.

Dr David Kraus of Alabama University said: "The beneficial effects of garlic-rich diets, specifically on cardiovascular disease, are mediated by hydrogen sulphide."

• Also scientists have found that garlic may cut the risk of bowel cancer by up to 30%. Scientists analysed studies on the herb carried out over the past 10 years. Some studies suggest half a clove of raw garlic a day is needed. Others show two a day can also help to prevent a lung condition — pulmonary arterial hypertension. Key ingredient allicin is thought to dampen inflammation in the body and act as an antioxidant.



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