

CERTIFIED ADVANCED HERBALISM COURSE - SESSION 25

• Herbs and Surgery - The Combination Could be Dangerous

Many people who suffer from sleep disorders take herbal medication, not only to promote sleep, but for other health problems. Many people who suffer from sleep disorders have to undergo surgical procedures, not only for conditions relevant to sleep, but also for other medical reasons.

In the July 11 issue of JAMA (the Journal of the American Medical Association) an article reports that physicians from the University of Chicago have researched several common herbal remedies and investigated the danger of their use in conjunction with surgical procedures. Some of the most common remedies can cause dangerous complications for people during or shortly after surgery.

JAMA lists eight such herbal remedies, preparations commonly used by many people. Two herbs often used by people with insomnia or other sleep problems are kava and valerian. Both these herbs promote sleep, reduce stress and anxiety and calm the body. They are, in fact, mild sedatives and this is where the danger of taking them in conjunction with surgery comes in. They may well increase the sedative effects of the anesthetic or other sedatives prescribed by your doctor. They should not be taken for a week or more before surgery and for several days after surgery. People take herbal remedies for many conditions besides using them to promote sleep.

- **Garlic** - Reduces blood pressure and helps to ward off infection.
- **Ginkgo biloba** - Not only increases circulation, it also helps with concentration and memory problems. There is a danger in using these in conjunction with surgery because both of these herbs interfere with the clotting properties of the blood and could cause severe bleeding problems. It would be wise to discontinue them a week before the date of your operation.
- **Echinacea** - Promotes healing and fights infection. Sounds like this would be desirable when you have surgery, but beware. Echinacea can cause a problem because it boosts your immune system and impairs immune suppressive drugs. Echinacea is especially dangerous if your surgery involves a transplant. Use of this herbal product should be discontinued as far in advance of surgery as possible.
- **Ephedra** - Often taken for its decongestant properties. However, this herb also increases your heart rate and raises the blood pressure. Stop using it at least 24 hours before surgery or heart attack or stroke could occur.
- **Ginseng** - Taken to improve the general health and well being and to reduce stress, also interferes with the clotting of the blood. Stop using it at least a week before surgery.
- **St. John's Wort** - Used for anxiety and depression, has already been under fire for its dangerous interactions with prescription medications. It alters the rate of metabolism of other drugs and may either increase or decrease the desired effect. Don't use St. John's Wort for at least 5 days before surgery.

If you are taking any herbal medication or dietary supplements, be sure to let your physician know. This is important at any time, as these supplements may have an adverse reaction when combined with your prescription medicines. It's doubly important to inform your doctor of everything you are taking if you're slated for surgery.

Beware of These Herbs

It should be noted that the FDA (Food and Drug Commission) has linked the following to cause serious side effects and even death -- so AVOID THEM

- **Herbal Laxatives** - Usually sold as a diet tea, cascara, senna, buckthorn, aloe and rhubarb root. These herbs can cause cramping, diarrhea, and if overused, could cause your bowels to no longer function without laxative stimulation.
- **Ephedra** - Also known as ma huang, in high doses can raise blood pressure, increase heart rate, and over stimulate the central nervous system. The FDA reports more than 800 reports of side effects linked with the use of ephedra, including heart palpitations, seizures, stroke, chest pain, and heart attack. This herb has caused at least two deaths.
- **Herbal fen-phen** - Ephedra is the main ingredient in the version of the dangerous diet drug known as fen fen. Herbal fen-phen has not been shown to even work in clinical trials, but we know its misuse is associated with severe side effects, from heartbeat irregularities to death from heart attack and stroke.