Herbal Remedies Conflict With Heart Disease Meds

More and more Americans are turning to herbal remedies to help manage chronic conditions or promote general health and wellness. But many of today's popular herbal supplements can pose serious risks to people who are taking medications for heart disease, according to a review article published in the February, 9, 2010, issue of the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*.

The use of these products is especially concerning among elderly patients who typically have co-morbidities, take multiple medications and are already at greater risk of bleeding, according to authors. “Many people have a false sense of security about these herbal products because they are seen as ‘natural,’” states Arshad Jahangir, M.D., Professor of Medicine, Mayo Clinic Arizona. He adds that more than 15 million Americans reportedly use herbal remedies or high-dose vitamins.

“But ‘natural’ doesn’t always mean they are safe. Every compound we consume has some effect on the body, which is, in essence, why people are taking these products to begin with,” he adds.

In addition to their direct effects on body function, these herbs can interact with medications used to treat heart disease, either reducing their effectiveness or increasing their potency, which may lead to bleeding or a greater risk for serious cardiac arrhythmias.

“We can see the effect of some of these herb-drug interactions—some of which can be life-threatening—on tests for blood clotting, liver enzymes and, with some medications, on electrocardiogram," Dr. Jahangir said.

According to the report, a major concern is that patients do not readily disclose their use of herbal remedies, and healthcare providers may not routinely ask about such use. In addition, because these herbs are regarded as food products, they are not subject to the same scrutiny and regulation as traditional medications.

Two nationwide surveys conducted in 1990 and 1997 found that the number of visits to complementary and alternative providers increased from 427 million to 629 million, whereas the number of visits to primary care physicians remained basically unchanged.

“These herbs have been used for centuries—well before today's cardiovascular medications—and while they may have beneficial effects these need to be studied scientifically to better define their usefulness and, more importantly, identify their potential for harm when taken with medications that have proven benefit for patients with cardiovascular diseases,” said Dr. Jahangir.

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