



Integrative Therapy Fact Sheet: Supplements

Many people are turning to dietary supplements or herbal products as a way to promote health, treat simple ailments, help with side effects from chemotherapy, and possibly treat cancer. There is limited research and evidence regarding the effectiveness of many supplement products.

Things to Consider Before Beginning a Supplement

- Because a product is labeled as “natural” doesn’t mean it’s always healthy or non-toxic. It may actually mean the product is less safe, because there is no way for healthcare providers to tell what is in the product.
- Claims about supplements found in magazines, websites, and on the radio can be over exaggerated and sometimes wrong. There is little to no research to support most of these claims.
- Manufacturers do have to follow good manufacturing practices to ensure that supplements are processed consistently and meet quality standards. However, there is no way to make sure the right ingredients are included in the appropriate amounts.
- Supplements can interact with prescription medications and chemotherapy. Herbal supplements have the potential to increase toxicity while a person is receiving chemotherapy, or possibly decrease its effectiveness.
- Many supplements are processed through the liver and can change liver functions or cause liver toxicity.
- Supplements don’t need to be approved by the FDA. However, the FDA is still responsible for monitoring their safety. If the FDA receives reports that a product is unsafe, it can take action against the manufacturer, distributor, or both.
- Manufacturers don’t need FDA approval in order to put a supplement on the market. They can claim that the product supports health or treats a disease only if they include a disclaimer that the FDA has not evaluated the claim.
- The FDA does require some information to be included on the manufacturer’s label. When purchasing a supplement, make sure the label contains:
 - The name of the supplement;
 - The name and address of the manufacturer (be cautious if the product is made outside the United States);
 - The complete list of ingredients, either in the supplement fact sheet or beneath it;
 - The serving size and amount;
 - The supplement’s active ingredients.
- It’s better to start with one supplement at a time to be sure you’re able to tolerate it before exploring another one.
- ***Always discuss what supplements you are taking with your healthcare care provider.***

Vitamins Can Be Fat-Loving or Water-Loving

Vitamins that are fat-loving are absorbed into your fat stay in your body longer and have the potential to cause more toxicity. Water-loving supplements are easily excreted in your urine and are less likely to cause problems.



Fat-loving vitamins are A, D, E, and K. If you are taking any of these vitamins, it is important to know signs of toxicity:

- **Vitamin A** – nausea, vomiting, headache, blurred vision, muscle weakness
- **Vitamin D** – gastrointestinal symptoms, elevation in calcium levels
- **Vitamin E** – fatigue, dizziness, weakness, headache, blurred vision, rash
- **Vitamin K** – dizziness, flushing

Antioxidants and Free Radicals

Radiation and some chemotherapy kill cancer cells by creating free radicals. Free radicals are normally found in your body. Free radicals help to kill certain types of bacteria and fungi, and also regulate cell growth and destruction. Antioxidants in your diet help protect cells from damage done by free radicals. If you are receiving chemotherapy that works by creating free radicals and you take a supplement that binds with free radicals, they might counteract each other and limit the effectiveness of your chemotherapy treatment.

A number of supplements are considered antioxidants, including beta-carotene; coenzyme Q10; vitamins A, C, and E; selenium; and zinc. If you are taking any supplements, be sure to tell your health care provider.

Integrative Medicine Consultation at the Zakim Center

Still have questions? Schedule an integrative medicine consult at the Zakim Center. Our nurse practitioner will explain the safety and benefits of integrative therapies, how they work in conjunction with traditional cancer treatment, and which ones may best fit your diagnosis, treatment schedule, and interests. To schedule an integrative medicine consult, please call **617-632-3322**.

Cost of Integrative Medicine Consultations

Integrative medicine consultations at Dana-Farber are billed to your insurance company, and the cost varies based on coverage.

Thanks to the generosity of donors, financial assistance is available to those who qualify for our other fee-based services, including acupuncture and massage. For more information, please contact the Zakim Center office at **617-632-3322** or Zakim_Center@dfci.harvard.edu.

Additional Information

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's "About Herbs" Database

<https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/treatments/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs/search>

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health "Cancer Prevention and Treatment" Page

<https://nccih.nih.gov/health/cancer>

American Botanical Council's "Healthy Ingredients" Page

<http://cms.herbalgram.org/healthyingredients>



Dana-Farber
Cancer Institute

Leonard P. Zakim Center
for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living

To learn more about the Zakim Center's programs and services, please visit our website at **dana-farber.org/zakim**, email **Zakim_Center@dfci.harvard.edu**, or call **617-632-3322**.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.