

The Ten Cardinal Rules of Herb Use

Georgia M. Decker, MS, RN, CS-ANP, CN, AOCN®

Research has shown that patients equate *natural* with *safe*, and some may believe that herbs are organ specific. For example, if antioxidants are used for cardiovascular health, patients may assume that they would not alter cancer therapy. This column is meant to be used as a teaching aid in improving communication between practitioners and patients.

Rule 1: Herbs should not be taken at the same time as any medicine. Taking herbs with prescription medicine or over-the-counter medicine changes the action of one or both.

Rule 2: “When in doubt, do without.” If you experience an unpleasant side effect while taking an herb, discontinue immediately. Remember that the so-called “healing crisis” could, in fact, be life threatening.

Rule 3: Learn about herbs before using them. Do not take the advice of people who are not knowledgeable about medicine and herbs.

Rule 4: Accurate diagnosis is essential before using *any* therapy. Many factors should be considered before attempting self-treatment. Do you know or think you know your diagnosis? Guesswork should not be your guide.

Rule 5: Herbal medicines are medicines and should be treated as such.

Treat herbal preparations with the same respect you would treat any medicine.

Rule 6: Some herbs are contraindicated in particular health situations. For example, some herbs cause low blood sugar and should not be used by those with hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia (diabetes), and others may alter blood-clotting mechanisms and should be avoided by people taking anticlotting medicines.

Rule 7: Herbs must be taken in specific doses at specific times. For example,

- Vitality and nutrition herbs and herbal formulas are best taken with meals.
- Pain-relief herbs and herbal formulas are best taken between meals.

Rule 8: The effectiveness of an herb depends on a variety of factors, including

proper dose, health status of the person, product quality, and purity.

Rule 9: When purchasing herbs, keep in mind that the best values may be in herb shops or health food stores, but be careful about purity.

Rule 10: Fresh herbs and dried herbs have near-equal advantages when purity is not in question.

Author Contact: Georgia M. Decker, MS, RN, CS-ANP, CN, AOCN®, can be reached at integrative@nycap.rr.com, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org.

Bibliography

Heinerman, J. (1996). *Heinerman's encyclopedia of healing herbs and spices*. New York: Reward Books.

Georgia M. Decker, MS, RN, CS-ANP, CN, AOCN®, is an advanced practice nurse at Integrative Care, NP, PC, in Albany, NY, and president-elect of the Oncology Nursing Society.

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/06.CJON.279