

Edamame (below) can lower cholesterol. Cranberry juice (at left, on ice with a wedge of lemon) can help prevent urinary tract infections.

GOOD FOR WHAT AILS YOU?

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THE FOUR TOP HERBAL AND FOOD SUPPLEMENTS – AND LEARN WHEN *not* TO USE THEM.

by Patti Verbanas

Herbal and food supplements are big business today, used by an estimated 65 percent of Americans. “Basically, herbs are very safe,” says Dale Bellisfield, R.N., a clinical herbalist in private practice at the Saint Barnabas Health Care System’s Siegler Center for Integrative Medicine in Livingston and the integrative health expert at the Montclair Breast Center (herbaldale.com). Research shows that there were no deaths this year from herbs or supplements. “Problems can arise when people self-treat. This is especially not a good idea if they are pregnant or breastfeeding or are on any pharmaceutical medications.” These are the situations in which you should seek the guidance of a qualified professional herbalist. Find a practitioner through the American Herbalists Guild (americanherbalistguild.com) or look for the designation “A.H.G.” after a practitioner’s name.

Supplements are regulated by the FDA under their own set of standards, which are more stringent than those for foods (and some are more stringent than those for drugs). According to Bellisfield, the best way to get the most out of a plant is through an alcohol-water extract, but many people prefer capsules since they are easier to take and taste better. If you tend to be allergic, be mindful of allergenic properties in supplements. “Buy from reputable sources and tell your physician what supplements you are taking,” Bellisfield says.

Since good herbal medicine treats both the patient and the condition, the herbs and dosage should be customized by a trained practitioner. “You want to make sure you’re taking the

right product for you, at the right dose, with the right part of the plant, in the right circumstances, and in the right form,” Bellisfield says.

Here, she discusses the four most used food and herbal supplements, their forms, benefits, and risks.

SOY

FORMS: Soy can be taken in a variety of ways, including whole soybeans, capsules, soy flour, soy protein, soy meal, and isolated isoflavones like genistein.

BENEFITS: Soy can lower cholesterol, reduce prostate swelling, control some menopause and osteoarthritis symptoms, help to build bone density, and assist in cancer prevention.

CAUTIONS: Soy is an allergenic food;

STOCKFOOD

do not use it if you are allergic to soy. Since it is also a highly genetically modified food, use organic soy and soy products. Soy can slow the thyroid down, exacerbating symptoms of hypothyroidism in people who suffer from the condition. There are also concerns about eating certain compounds (phytates, trypsin inhibitors, hemagglutinin) in unfermented soy foods. Traditional soy food sources, such as tofu, tempeh, and miso soup, are less problematic.

GARLIC

FORMS: Garlic is best eaten fresh and raw, and finely chopped or crushed. Let minced garlic sit for 10 minutes to fully activate the powerful medicinal compound called allicin that the chopping generates. If raw garlic is not palatable, consider using it in pesto, which contains three health powerhouses: fresh basil, garlic, and olive oil. Garlic also comes in capsules; if you prefer this form, make sure the allicin content (the standardized, most active part) is listed as 5,000 mcg per day per capsule.

BENEFITS: Garlic boosts heart health: It can help reduce blood pressure, drive down cholesterol, and help create a good overall blood lipid profile. The oils in garlic help prevent disorders of blood vessels outside the heart and brain and lung infections. While aged garlic extract does not lower cholesterol, many studies show its cancer-protective effect. (Note that allicin is needed for garlic's cholesterol-

lowering and anti-bacterial effects, but is not necessary for the anti-cancer benefits.) Garlic is a medicine cabinet in a plant: It has antiviral, antibacterial, antifungal, and anti-worm properties. **CAUTIONS:** Avoid garlic if you are allergic to it. Also, raw garlic can irritate a sensitive stomach. Since garlic can thin the blood, those taking an anticoagulant should have their international normalized ratio tested regularly to monitor the balance between effective blood clotting and too-thin blood, which can result in excessive bleeding.

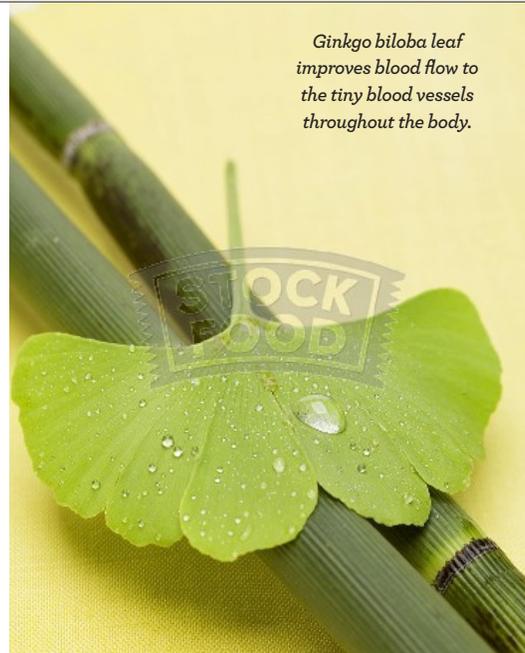


CRANBERRIES

FORMS: Cranberries can be taken in capsules or as unsweetened cranberry concentrate. Even though the juice is sour and bitter, resist the temptation to add sugar. Likewise, stay away from cran-raisins since they tend to be high in sugar.

BENEFITS: Cranberries can prevent bacteria from adhering to the urinary tract, and can prevent and treat urinary tract infections, but do not use them as a substitute for medication when an infection is present. They are also valuable for ulcer prevention and treatment since they reduce the adhesion of *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria that can cause gastric ulcers. Plus, they are high in vitamin C.

CAUTIONS: Large amounts of cranberry juice may interact with blood thinners like Coumadin, increasing their potency. *



Ginkgo biloba leaf improves blood flow to the tiny blood vessels throughout the body.

GINKGO BILOBA LEAF

FORMS: Ginkgo biloba leaf is taken in capsules. This form is more like a pharmaceutical since it is sold as a highly concentrated standardized extract. Look for a product that is standardized to 24 percent flavonoid glycosides and 6 percent terpenes. Ginkgo is not particularly water-soluble, and since there have been no real studies on ginkgo leaf tea, clinical herbalists do not recommend its use in that way. Likewise, do not waste your money on products, such as cereal, that list ginkgo as an ingredient, since that is more a gimmick than a real benefit.

BENEFITS: Ginkgo improves blood flow to the tiny blood vessels throughout the body, which helps people with poor circulation to the extremities, such as those who suffer from diabetes or Raynaud's disease. It also optimizes blood circulation in the brain, which can aid in tinnitus, vertigo, and anxiety management. Some studies have shown it to increase memory in older adults, and it is used to slow the progression of dementia. In women, ginkgo can mitigate the anorgasmia that occurs as a side-effect to antidepressant medication. The herb may also help stop or lessen some retinal problems, such as macular degeneration.

CAUTIONS: Since ginkgo can thin the blood, stop taking it one week before any surgery. It can also cause digestive upset, headaches, and in some rare cases it has caused isolated bleeding.