Opening the Dialogue: Herbal Supplementation and Chemotherapy

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Presently, healthcare providers have little scientific evidence on which to base recommendations about use of herbal supplements with chemotherapy. Lack of product standardization and definitive knowledge about herb interaction with chemotherapy may expose patients with cancer to potentially serious side effects. Patients continue to use herbal supplements with their cancer treatments, often without informing their healthcare providers. Research currently is ongoing to study the effects of the concomitant administration of herbal supplements and chemotherapy.

Patients continue to turn, in increasing numbers, to herbal supplements for relief from side effects they may experience as a result of their cancer treatment. Many patients do not tell their oncologists or nurses if they are using any supplements. As many as 72% of patients surveyed had not informed their physicians of their use of herbal supplements (Powell, Dibble, Dall’Era, & Cohen, 2002; Sparreboom et al., 2004).

The purpose of this article is to increase healthcare providers’ awareness about the use of herbal supplements by patients receiving cancer chemotherapy and to provide guidelines for accurate assessment of this phenomenon. Use of these or similar guidelines will enhance communication between patients and nurses and help to educate patients about reliable resources for information and guidance regarding their use of herbal supplements.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Information for Professionals

For physicians and nurses, the silence of patients with cancer regarding their use of herbal supplements presents a difficult