

RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin

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A joint initiative of the Patient Services Section and the Drug and Therapeutics Information Service of the Pharmacy Department, Repatriation General Hospital, Daw Park, South Australia. The RGH Pharmacy E-Bulletin is distributed in electronic format on a weekly basis, and aims to present concise, factual information on issues of current interest in therapeutics, drug safety and cost-effective use of medications.

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Complementary and alternative medicines in RA

This E-Bulletin addresses the use of Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) for patients with Rheumatoid Arthritis. The definition of CAMs used here includes practices and products that are not presently considered to be part of conventional medicine practiced by medical doctors or allied health professionals.

Many CAM therapies are heavily advertised and make attractive claims, often based on personal stories. People with a chronic condition such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), may be attracted to CAMs if conventional treatment is not working as well as they would like, or if there are side effects from conventional treatment. There is sometimes a belief that CAM therapies are safer and more natural. There is relatively limited information on how CAMs may work, how they compare to conventional treatments, what is the most effective dose and how they might interact with other medication.

A recent evidence based report on oral and topical CAMs in arthritis was published by the Arthritis Research Campaign UK. It summarises existing published studies and scores various CAMs according to their effectiveness, measured by improvements in pain, movement, or general well-being for RA, osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia. Safety is also graded.

Evidence is available for 40 products in relation to RA, osteoarthritis or fibromyalgia. Two thirds of the products targeting RA are shown to have “little or no effect”. These include antler velvet, blackcurrant seed oil, collagen, eazmov herbal preparation, feverfew, flaxseed oil, green-lipped mussels, homeopathy, reumalex herbal mixture, selenium, Chinese herb tong luo kai bi, vitamins A, C and E anti-oxidant vitamins and willow bark

In contrast there is good evidence that fish body oil reduces joint pain and stiffness in RA. There is some unconfirmed evidence that the combination of fish body and liver oils might have long-term benefit in RA, particularly in reducing daily requirements of NSAIDs. Both fish body oil and fish liver oil (cod-liver-oil) are rich in omega-3-essential fatty acids which can regulate the body's immune system and fight joint inflammation. Cod-liver-oil is also a rich source of vitamin A and vitamin D. The CAM report gave fish oil products a green safety classification meaning reported side effects were mainly minor and infrequent.

There is much less safety information available for CAMs compared to conventional medicine. One quarter of compounds have important reported side effects. Thunder god vine is a Chinese herbal medicine of the botanical family Celastraceae. It received a red safety classification meaning serious adverse effects were reported. There are well documented adverse effects of stomach pain, diarrhoea, nausea, headache, skin rash, hair loss, male infertility and amenorrhoea. Also the herb can be extremely poisonous if it is not extracted properly. Thunder god vine is also known as T Wilfordii Hook (TWHF), Lei gong teng, Lei kung teng, Huang teng ken, Tsao-ho-hua, yellow vine root, early rice flower and three wing nut. It has immunosuppressant activity and reduces the production of the proteins responsible for joint inflammation, however the side effects outweigh any possible benefit.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION – CONTACT THE PHARMACY DEPARTMENT ON 82751763 or email: chris.alderman@rgh.sa.gov.au
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