

# Natural Health Products

(vitamins, minerals,  
herbs or supplements)

**For people living with cancer**

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**This booklet will give you information about:**

- what natural health products are
- what we know about natural health products
- possible risks of taking natural health products
- commonly asked questions and questions to ask your health-care team about natural health products
- where to find more information





**Some natural health products can have powerful effects on your mind and body. Taking some natural health products may affect how well your cancer treatment works. They can also make your symptoms and side effects of treatment worse.**

**Talk to your pharmacist or oncologist (cancer doctor) before you take any vitamins, minerals, herbs, antioxidants or other supplements.**

**Please call the Odette Cancer Centre at 416-480-5000, Monday to Friday 9:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. We can help you decide if the natural health product is safe to use during your cancer treatment.**



# What are natural health products?

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**Natural health products** are:

- vitamins (like vitamins A, B, C, D, E)
- minerals (like magnesium, calcium, selenium)
- herbs in large amount or concentrated forms (like turmeric shots, ginger tea, oregano oil)
- antioxidants (like vitamin C, vitamin E, beta carotene, selenium)
- supplements (like mushroom pills, St. John's wort, echinacea, milk thistle)

Natural health products (like pills, powder, shots, tea, etc.) **can have very high amounts of ingredients** in them. This means, that by taking a natural health product, you are taking much more than what you would normally get from food.

For example, turmeric shots or pills are considered a natural health products because they have much more turmeric in them than you would normally get from food. The turmeric found in your curry recipe is NOT considered a natural health product because it is much less.



# What do we know about natural health products?

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Natural health products can affect your body in mild or powerful ways.

We know that some medications (drugs), including some chemotherapy medications, are developed from plant or natural sources. The use of these medications are:

- supported by high levels of scientific research
- strongly regulated (controlled) by Health Canada

Natural health products are not as strongly regulated (controlled) and may not be tested in the same ways medications are. This can mean:

- the exact amount of the natural or herbal medicine in the product is not known
- it has less or lower quality scientific research to support its health claims



# What are the possible risks if I take natural health products?

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Some research suggests that if you take natural health products it may affect how well your cancer treatment (chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and other prescribed medication) works. **Please talk to your pharmacist or oncologist (cancer doctor) about all natural health products you use or plan to use.**

**Taking supplements with large amounts of antioxidants in them, like vitamin C, vitamin E, beta-carotene, and selenium while on radiation treatment, chemotherapy or immunotherapy is not recommended.**

- Many treatments will work in opposite ways to how antioxidants act. This may affect how well your cancer treatment works.
- Foods that have antioxidants in them, like fruits, vegetables and whole grains, are safe to eat during treatment.

Natural health products may make the symptoms and side effects of treatment worse.

Natural health products may have unsafe ingredients or substances.



# Commonly asked questions

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## **1. Do I need to take vitamin, mineral or antioxidant supplements?**

No. Unless your doctor tells you otherwise. Your body needs the same amount of vitamins and minerals as before your cancer diagnosis. The best way to get vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants is to eat a variety of foods. Try to eat vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and protein foods every day.

Go to [food-guide.canada.ca](https://food-guide.canada.ca) for more information.

## **2. Can I eat herbs and spices in food?**

Yes. Herbs and spices are safe to eat, when you use small amounts of them in your regular recipes.

## **3. Can I continue to take my multivitamin-mineral supplement while I am on treatment?**

Maybe. A regular strength multivitamin-mineral is usually ok. Tell your health-care team about all vitamins and minerals that you take, before you start treatment. Your health-care team will let you know what is safe to take.



#### 4. What can I do to stay well during treatment?

To stay well when living with cancer and during your treatment:

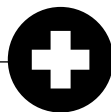
- go to your treatment appointments
- take your prescribed medications (drugs)
- eat well
- be active
- get enough sleep

**Patient and Family Support** can help you with emotional, social and financial support, rehabilitation and nutrition. Please call 416-480-4623 (Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) or visit **[sunnybrook.ca/cancer/support](http://sunnybrook.ca/cancer/support)**.



# More questions to ask your pharmacist or doctor

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Please know the name and dose (amount) of the natural health product, before you speak with your doctor or pharmacist. Please write down the products you take.

Here are some questions you could ask:

- Is there scientific research to show that the natural health product will help me?
- Will this natural health product cause problems with my cancer treatment or other medications (drugs) I take?
- Is it ok to take this natural health product now, or should I wait until after my treatment is done?
- What side effects should I watch for?
- If I stop taking my natural health product during treatment, when can I restart?

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<b>Name of product and who made it</b>	<b>I am using this for...</b>	<b>I take...</b>	<b>Other</b>
<i>For example: Vitamin D Webber Naturals</i>	<i>My bone health</i>	<i>2 tablets once daily by mouth (1000 IU/tablets)</i>	<i>My family doctor recommended this</i>



# Where can I find more information?

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These websites will give you information that is based on research.

- Odette Cancer Centre Complementary and Alternative Medicine: [sunnybrook.ca/cancer/cam](http://sunnybrook.ca/cancer/cam)
- Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre – About Herbs, Botanicals & Other Products: [mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine/about-herbs-botanicals-other-products](http://mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine/about-herbs-botanicals-other-products)
- MedlinePlus – Drugs, Herbs and Supplements: [medlineplus.gov/druginformation.html](http://medlineplus.gov/druginformation.html)

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## Notes:



This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. In the top right corner, there is a small black circular icon containing a white stylized graphic of a notepad and a pencil.



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Email: [patienteducation@sunnybrook.ca](mailto:patienteducation@sunnybrook.ca)