

What are natural health products?

Natural health products (NHPs) are naturally occurring substances that are used to restore or maintain good health. They are often made from plants, but can also be made from animals, microorganisms and marine sources. They come in a wide variety of forms like tablets, capsules, tinctures, solutions, creams, ointments and drops.

How can I tell if a NHP has been authorized for sale in Canada?

To be licensed in Canada, NHPs must be safe, effective, of high quality and carry detailed label information to let people make safe and informed choices. You can identify products that have been licensed for sale in Canada by looking for the eight-digit Natural Product Number (NPN) or Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM) on the label. A NPN or DIN-HM means that the product has been authorized for sale in Canada and is safe and effective when used according to the instructions on the label. If there is no NPN or DIN-HM, it does not mean that the product is unsafe but that Health Canada has not tested the safety and efficacy of the product. Likewise, a DIN is also assigned to each prescription drug. A DIN (Drug Identification Number) is an eight-digit number assigned to each drug product authorized for use in Canada. Thus the NPN and the DIN-HM follow similar regulations as the DIN, but are specific to NHPs and homeopathic medicines.

What does a NPN or a DIN-HM look like?



Is it always safe to use a NHP? **NO!**

While natural health products are generally safe and have fewer side effects than medications, they are not risk free. However, some people assume that because a health product is labelled “natural”, it is “safe”! NHPs, like prescription drugs, can have potentially serious side effects, and may even be toxic if they are not taken at the recommended dose. Did you know that 12% of Canadians who use NHPs reported having experienced some adverse effects with these products! Yet only 41% of Canadians who experienced unwanted side effects (adverse reactions) to natural health products reported them.

Moreover, NHPs and homeopathic medicines may not be suitable for people with certain health conditions and can interfere with prescription drugs. Some NHPs can increase, reduce or hinder the effects of certain drugs, thereby counteracting their intended therapeutic effects.

For instance, Echinacea is a natural product which is not recommended for scleroderma patients. Indeed, Echinacea has, among its properties, the capacity to boost the immune system. As such all “autoimmune” diseases, including scleroderma, can interfere with Echinacea. This herbal remedy can enhance the symptoms of autoimmune diseases by stimulating the immune system.

Another example of a product to be used with caution in patients with scleroderma is melatonin. Although it may lower nocturnal blood pressure in patients with essential hypertension, paradoxically it can also interfere with nifedipine, an antihypertensive drug, and cause an increase in blood pressure. Thus, melatonin can interfere with several drugs that some scleroderma patients normally take, including anti-inflammatory and immunosuppressive drugs. In addition, its drowsiness-inducing properties can compound the sedative effects of narcotic analgesic drugs. For all these reasons, scleroderma patients must be extremely vigilant before taking melatonin.



One last example involves probiotics. In many cases, scleroderma patients may be required to take immunosuppressive drugs, such as Cyclophosphamide or Azathioprine, to help improve symptoms control. However, probiotics are not recommended for these immunosuppressed individuals, because even though probiotics are considered “good” bacteria, they can nevertheless be dangerous in immunosuppressed patients.

Therefore, one must be particularly vigilant when taking NHPs. Only your pharmacist can check for potential negative interactions between NHPs and prescription medications to avoid harmful situations.

How to reduce the risk?

ALWAYS consult a doctor or pharmacist before choosing a product, even if it is a natural or homeopathic product, in the same way as you would for a prescription drug. This precaution is even more important for people who take multiple medications, to make sure there are no adverse interactions between them.

Also, it is preferable to use NHPs over a short period (less than 3 months), because the long-term effects of extended use of these products are often unknown, since studies assessing long-term effects of NHPs are scarce.

In summary:

There has been very few clinical studies and research on NHPs and homeopathic medicines. Hence, the issue of drug interactions and NHPs is not yet fully understood and would certainly require further study. It has nevertheless become sufficiently clear that in absence of concrete data about potential NHP interactions, a precautionary principle should be exercised. In fact, even short-term use can sometimes lead to adverse interactions. It is often difficult to say with any certainty if a NHP will trigger an adverse interaction when taken with prescription medications. One should bear in mind that interactions can always occur when mixing NHPs and medications. So before taking any natural or homeopathic product, talk to your health care provider and pharmacist who are qualified and have experience with the use of these products, ensuring their safety and effectiveness.

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