

## Pregnant or Breastfeeding? Get the Facts on Herbal Teas and Products

Herbs have been used for centuries to flavour our foods and to prevent or treat health problems. Most modern drugs came from plants. For example, the heart drug *digoxin* originally came from Foxglove leaves and *morphine*, a drug that relieves pain, is made from the Poppy flower.

### Can herbs and herbal products be harmful?

Yes! Some herbs contain very strong, drug-like ingredients. A few can be poisonous and life-threatening. For example, *Ma Huang*, also known as *ephedrine*, which is claimed to be a diet aid, can cause death.

Health Canada has found herbal products which have been contaminated with dangerous amounts of arsenic and mercury, or containing drugs such as steroids, hormones, diuretics and anti-inflammatories.

Another hazard is the risk of an allergic reaction. Herbal products can contain a variety of allergens such as pollen, mould and mould spores.

### How do I know if an herbal product has been approved for use?

In Canada, any product that is sold to treat or prevent diseases or symptoms is regulated as a "drug" under Canada's Food and Drugs Act.

If an herbal product is sold as a drug, it will have a Drug Identification Number (DIN) or a General Public Number (G.P.) issued by Health Canada on the label. These numbers are only assigned when a product meets the safety requirements of Canada's Food and Drugs Act. Look for this number on the label. If a product does not have one of these numbers, it has not been approved for use.

Many herbal products are sold as "food supplements", not as drugs. Unlike drugs, food supplements are neither clinically tested nor regulated. For this reason, manufacturers are not allowed to put any health information on the label.



**Nutrition**  
*Matters*

Generally, these products do not list any of the potential side effects and there is no guarantee that the products are safe, pure or potent.

Since manufacturers of herbal products are not required to list potentially toxic substances on the label, you can be exposed to dangerous substances. Fortunately, most herbal preparations are probably harmless. At present, there are no labeling requirements for herbal products that would clearly indicate to pregnant or breastfeeding women which ones to avoid.



## Are any herbal teas safe to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

According to Health Canada, the following herbal teas are generally considered safe to drink during pregnancy and breastfeeding if taken in moderation. A moderate amount would be no more than three cups (1 cup = 250 mL) of weak tea a day.

### Herbal teas generally considered safe if taken in moderation (2-3 cups/day)

- Ginger
- Linden flower\*
- Rose hip
- Lemon balm
- Orange peel
- Citrus peel

\*Not recommended for people with heart conditions

## Are herbs safe to use during pregnancy and breastfeeding?

Just as you are careful about using drugs while you are pregnant or breastfeeding, you should be careful about using herbal products. Herbs can have drug-like effects and therefore can be dangerous for you and your unborn baby! For example, the active ingredients in some herbal products can:

- stimulate the uterus or cause uterine contractions;
- act as a diuretic which can cause you to urinate often;
- produce toxic effects on the developing baby;
- cause birth defects;
- cause infant deaths; and
- pass on to the baby through breast milk and harm the baby.

At this time there is not enough scientific information about the safety of various herbs and herbal products to recommend their general use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, use these products with caution.

*Chamomile* tea has been reported to have harmful effects on the uterus and should not be used while you are pregnant. If you are allergic to plants or pollen, you need to be careful not to use products that contain herbs related to the plants to which you are allergic.

If you suffer from nausea or vomiting during your pregnancy, try *ginger* tea! *Ginger* tea is safe to drink in moderation and may help you feel better.

Herbal teas should not take the place of more nutritious drinks, especially milk.

If you decide to drink herbal teas as alternatives to drinks that contain caffeine, choose teas from the safe list or drink plain water. Other choices include hot water with lemon, hot milk or hot apple juice.

## Should I be concerned about caffeine?

Some people choose herbal beverages instead of coffee or black tea to avoid caffeine. A moderate amount of caffeine will not harm you or your baby. It's best to have no more than 300 milligrams of caffeine a day from all sources while you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Caffeine is a stimulant which may cause your baby to be irritable and have trouble sleeping.

## Sources of Caffeine\*

On average, 300 mg of caffeine would be contained in:

- 1 1/2 cups of filter drip coffee
- 3 cups of instant coffee
- 5 cups of strong tea
- 7 cans (355 ml can) of cola beverage
- 6 cans diet cola beverage
- 35 cups of chocolate milk
- 15 candy, sweet chocolate (28 g)

(1 cup = 250 mL=8 oz)

\*Taken from Fact sheet "Caffeine and your Health"

Health Canada 2005 [www.healthcanada.ca](http://www.healthcanada.ca)

You should be aware that some flavoured teas contain black tea with added flavour, so they actually contain caffeine.

## Are herbal teas and preparations safe for babies?

The safety of herbal teas and herbal preparations for babies is unknown. Because babies are small and are growing quickly, they are more vulnerable than adults to the toxic effects of herbal preparations, including herbal teas. There have been reports of severe illness and death in babies fed



herbal teas.

Health Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society and Dietitians of Canada recommend that **HERBAL TEAS OR DRINKS SHOULD NOT BE GIVEN TO BABIES.**

## The Bottom Line

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, choose your herbal teas carefully! Keep in mind that while the toxic effects are known for some herbs, the toxic effects of others are unknown. If in doubt, check with a pharmacist, physician or dietitian, or call MotherRisk at the Hospital for Sick Children (416) 813-6780.

## Books with reliable information about herbs

*Herbs of Choice: The Therapeutic Use of Phytomedicinals*, by V.E. Tyler. Pharmaceutical Products Press, 1994.

*The Honest Herbal: A Sensible Guide to the Use of Herbs and Related Remedies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., by V.E. Tyler. Pharmaceutical Products Press, 1993.