

NUTRITIONALLY SPEAKING

by

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HERBS CAN BE DANGEROUS

DEAR DR. MEINIG: Someone who knows you quite well told me that you weren't in favor of the use of herb teas. Their use makes a lot more sense than coffee, cokes, and most of the other beverages. How come you are not for them? S. P.

DEAR S. P.: Herbs have been used as a medicine and to some extent as a food for about as long as man has roamed the earth. During the last ten years or so with all the interest that has developed in nutrition there has been a growing use of herbs as a beverage or tea.

Inasmuch as all herbs are thought of as natural substances, there is a tendency for people to believe they are universally good to drink. Unfortunately, very few in-depth studies have been made of the contents of most of the hundreds of herbs that are on the market. The ingredients of each one can be quite complex and ^{of} ~~the~~ use them regularly and often can be dangerous.

It is all well and good to use certain herbs for a short period for a medicinal purpose or a health problem but after one becomes well, any success they have had encourages their continued use on a regular and more frequent basis.

There are 396 herbs and spices marketed for the use as tea. Dr. R. K. Siegel of the Los Angeles School of Medicine has found that 43 of these cause mental behavior alterations. Others cause kidney, urinary tract, stomach and intestinal problems.

The leaves of wax myrtle, rosemary, sweet gum tree and the root

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of marshmallow contain tannin. It is used in curing leather, is compatible with most enzymes and the salts of many metals, and may cause serious systemic toxicity and liver damage. Active diuretics and kidney irritants are found in dandelion root, dog grass, watermelon seeds, buchu, cranberries and juniper berries. Gotu kola contains caffeine.

When safrole, an ingredient in sassafras tea, was found to cause cancer in rats it was banned by the FDA in 1960. It is still fairly easy to obtain and is used as a flavoring agent in rootbeer. Sassafras is allowed but is supposed to be safrole free. Safrole is also found in nutmeg, mace, anise and camphor. Tarragon contains estrogole which is also a weak carcinogen. This herb is used frequently in salad dressings.

Camomile, fennel, eucalyptus, citral, rosemary, sabinol, mint and valerian are terpenes that are known depressants and can cause kidney irritation. Tansy and savin also are disturbers of the kidneys and ^{they} markedly irritate the urinary tract.

The Food and Drug Administration published a report in 1977 on the "Status of Herbs for Food Use" (e.g. herbal teas) in which they listed 27 herbs that were reviewed by their Division of Toxicology and categorized as "unsafe." This is not an all-inclusive list.

Paul Eck, Ph.D., the noted hair analysis and mineral ratio specialist, has demonstrated the crucial relationship minerals have to one another. He has found the concentration of minerals in many herbs to be very high and that in such instances their use can be antagonistic or inhibit body chemistry programs for some metabolic types of individuals.

One critical example of ^{herb} ~~the~~ harmful effects he found in those ~~people~~ who have high aluminum levels, which could not be traced to

more common sources. ^{This} often occurred to people who regularly consumed peppermint tea. Analysis showed this herb contains high levels of aluminum. One of the reasons peppermint tea is liked so much is its soothing effect on the stomach after a heavy meal. This action is due to its aluminum concentration. Aluminum is well-known for its use in buffer agents and antacid tablets, and the frequency of their use is considered by some to be the reason Alzheimer patients have high levels of aluminum in their hair.

The detrimental problems that could come from the use of herbs would be small if they were only consumed occasionally. The difficulties magnify greatly when they are used as a beverage or tea, as the tendency is to drink increasing amounts, thereby creating a habit that can be as detrimental as the coffee, cokes and other beverages you mention in your question.

If these problem areas in the use of herbs aren't serious enough, a recent November issue of the British medical journal Lancet contained a report by four Chinese doctors who related how 17 Chinese developed rapid irregular heart beats and that two died within six hours after consuming root stocks of aconitum plants. The doctors expressed concern about current herbal methods of fabrication, even in China, stating that several factors might easily predispose users to accidental aconite poisoning.

Many selling herbs and who profess to be herbologists are not qualified so, as in this case, unsatisfactory curing of the root stock and the dosages they recommend introduce difficulties that are unsuspected by the public. I have often mentioned we were meant to chew our food, not drink it. A glass or a cup of tea grows into a second

or third one, and instead of once in a while, people tend to imbibe several times in a single day. Everything we take into our stomachs combines ^{and reacts} with everything else that is there. Even good nutritional foods can imbalance body chemistry when they are consumed in excessive amounts. The wide variety of constituents in herbs can easily disturb body chemistry activity, particularly if one or more of their ingredients are of a toxic nature.

You can see that while some herb tea may be better than coffee, coke and other beverages, it "ain't necessarily so!!!" ^{Good water proves so delightful} ~~the~~ ^{to drink when we} are thirsty, why do we so easily become "hooked" on so many different and often harmful beverages?

Everyone has a question about nutrition. Send yours to Dr. George, c/o OVN, Box 277, Ojai, CA 93023.