*Be like a gorilla -
take your herbs whole*

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**How To Avoid Dangerous Herbs** *by John Douillard, DC, PhD*

Recently, I heard a radio advertisement for a new super concentrated prostate formula claimed to be 1000 times more potent than what you might purchase at a natural foods store.  I imagine the marketing company assumed that listeners would think, "If it is 1000 times stronger it must be 1000 time better" and everyone would buy it. If you think that 1000 times stronger or even a 100 or 50 times stronger is better, then please read on.

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Personally when I heard this ad I was frightened.  I said to myself, "**This is not an herbal supplement, it is a drug. 1000 times stronger isn't better, it's downright dangerous**."

Drugs have side effects that must be informed of by law. We have all heard the voice over on a TV drug ad that lists the horrendous litany of side effects while watching a gorgeous couple ride into the sunset. Super potent herbal supplements are not regulated by the FDA and therefore do not have to post side effects, even if they exist.

**New Natural Drugs**

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| *Even herbs can be manufactured into drugs.* |

I assume that a consumer who is aligned with natural and alternative therapies feels that any herb on a health food store shelf is safer than a drug. I wish I could say this is true. In the 1970's the standardized herbal extract was born in Europe in an attempt to concentrate, increase potency, make patentable and mimic the drug like effectiveness of whole herbs.

**The Dangers of Herbal Extracts**

A standardized extract is a process where one active constituent is extracted from the original herb. **This concentrate, which is standardized into one active ingredient, is then "spiked" or "loaded" back into an herbal base of that product. This is a phytopharmaceutical process that is a topic of heated debate among herbalists. These extracts are known to act more like drugs, carry toxic residues from the extraction solvents and have significantly more adverse reactions.** While they may initially offer increased potency , **the body can build up a tolerance to the extract and require higher and higher dosages - much like a drug**.  In addition, side effects can ensue, which rarely happens with a "whole herb" product.

In certain medical conditions these extracts can be useful only if there is a deep understanding of the herbs, their extracts and the potential interactions with other herbs, drugs or that individual.  Otherwise standardized extracts are simply too risky in my opinion.  Here's why!

**Messing With Mother Nature**

In today's herbal world, common herbs are typically standardized to one active ingredient. Nature only puts a small amount of an active chemical in a plant for a reason and often it is because more would be too dangerous.

**More Isn't Better**

In one report, a small herbal company ran low on an herb called Cascara sagrada which is commonly found in bowel moving formulas. The company replaced the whole herb Cascara sagrada, which originally made up 25% of the formula, with 25% of the Cascara sagrada extract. The active ingredient in the Cascara sagrada, called cascarols, went from 2% of the formula to 25%, making it 1000 times more potent. Within 3 1/2 weeks the company posted a total product recall because the side effects were so frequent and severe(1).

**Is a Better Mood Worth a Toxic Liver?**

Kava Kava has been used safely for 1000's of years in Oceania for mood support. Western companies, in search of the next best selling anti-depression herb, extracted the active chemical of Kava Kava called kavalactones. These kavalactones represent only a small part of this herb's blueprint because they are toxic to the liver in high dosages without the other buffering constituents in that plant. Shortly after Kava Kava became the next big selling antidepressant herb, it was pulled off the shelves by the FDA because of its liver toxicity.  Falsely accused, this incredibly safe herb when taken as a whole herb, has now been given a life sentence.

**Whole Herbs are More Healing**

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The synergy of the whole plant makes it safe, potent, effective and reliable. When you take one active chemical out, this becomes a drug.. This means the whole plant is dried and ground - that is it.

**The Biggest Oops of All**

Many of the most powerful plants used in herbal medicine, such as St. Johns Wort, Ashwaganda, Echinacea, Kava Kava and Ginseng, are typically standardized into just one "active constituent." In many of these cases the constituent they have been standardized into turned out to not be the active ingredient.

St Johns Wort for example, is typically standardized to a certain amount of hypericin, but it is now believed that hyperiform is actually the most active constituent in the herb. Oops, we were activating the wrong chemical. This is a common and potentially dangerous occurrence with extracts.

**Extracts Are Not Regulated**

The other big oops is to know what potency of the standardized extract is safe. Valerian root naturally has a very low concentration of valerenic acid because it can be toxic to the liver at high dosages.  The standardization process can concentrate a formula with any percentage of the valerenic acid because the amount we see in an herbal product is up to the discretion of that company. There is no regulation of this and no real consensus to date on what would be most appropriate and safe.

**Buyer Beware!**

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While most natural food store brands are reliable and safe, it is challenging to know for sure. **Beware of products that make big claims of a**

**What To Avoid:**

Look for products that are whole herb products. These are the medicinal foods of nature and you really cannot go wrong.

Products that claim a cure.

**Extracts can be extremely safe if they are *whole herb* or *full spectrum concentrates* rather than the standardized extracts.**

Standardized extracts can also be safe depending on the herb, manufacturing process and percentage of active chemical used.

For 100% safety use standardized extracts only if you are familiar with the manufacturer, the herb used and its safety history.  Consult your natural food representative for advice about a particular product before buying.

Check labels for *Other Ingredients*, such as fillers, conditioners and flow agents.

**References**

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