

## **PALLIATIVE CARE TIPS**

### **Issue # 33     Natural Health Products in Cancer**

Original Contributor: Doreen Oneschuk, MD. Alberta Health Services, Tertiary Palliative Care Unit, Grey Nuns Community Hospital; Editor: Yoko Tarumi, MD, Palliative Care Program, Royal Alexandra Hospital - (Re-issued December 2009)

#### **What is the significance of NHPs in caring cancer patient?**

Cancer patients are common users of complementary therapies, including NHPs.

#### **What are NHPs, and what are regulations in Canada?**

1. Herbal Remedies, Vitamins and Minerals, Homeopathic Medicines, Traditional Medicine such as Traditional Chinese Medicines, Probiotics, Amino Acids and Essential Fatty Acids
2. The new NHP Directorate (NHPD) requires that all Canadian manufacturers, packagers, labelers, and importers have site licenses and meet good manufacturing standards outline in the regulations. This ensures all products are well prepared, safe to use, effective, and come with instructions on how to use.
3. If a product has satisfied these requirements, it will have a NPN or Drug Identification Number-Homeopathic Medicine (DIN-HM) on the package. Patients should be advised to look for this.

#### **How can we counsel cancer patients on NHPs?**

1. It is important to ask about their use. The majority of patients will not share with their health care providers they are taking NHPs unless asked.
2. When counseling, be guided by the principle of 'do no harm'.
3. Be informed about potential effects of NHPs, and be able to discuss the subject in a non judgmental way.
4. You can advise without condoning.
5. Patients should be warned about misinformation on retail websites, including sponsored sites. Become familiar with some reputable websites dealing with Complementary Therapies, and NHPs.

#### **How can we advise patients regarding NHP use during chemotherapy (CTX) and/or radiation therapy (RTX)?**

1. **Controversial:** study results are mixed as to whether antioxidants reduce toxicity associated with anticancer therapy.
2. **Proponents:** antioxidant use during CTX may reduce lipid peroxidation and aldehyde production, both of which can inhibit drug induced cell death. Antioxidants may improve blood flow within tumors, and surrounding tissues improving response to RTX.
3. **Cons:** NHPs may affect P450 hepatic cytochrome enzymes which oxidize many anticancer agents i.e. may induce or inhibit activity of enzymes potentially leading to subtherapeutic or toxic levels of chemotherapeutic agents. RTX relies on free radical generation and reactive oxygen species for its effect-antioxidants may reduce reactive oxygen species lessening RTX effectiveness.
4. **Important to be aware:** Some herbs possess antiplatelet and anticoagulant activity, interact with corticosteroids, CNS drugs, product hepatotoxicity, nephrotoxicity, and have additive effects with opioids. Avoid use with thrombocytopenia, other anticoagulants, in the perioperative period.

#### **BOTTOM LINE**

Until we know more (more studies), best to avoid the use of NHPs, particularly those with high antioxidant properties, during CTX and RTX.

**REMEMBER:** For referrals, questions, or telephone consultations call 780-496-1300 weekdays and weekends.

Palliative Care Tips are now available on our Website: [www.palliative.org](http://www.palliative.org)