

Cancer patients should not hesitate to speak with their doctors about dietary supplements

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Many cancer patients use dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals and herbs or other botanicals but often don't tell their doctor.

This gap in communication can happen when [patients](#) believe that their [doctors](#) are indifferent or negative toward their use of these supplements. As a result, patients may find information about dietary supplements from unreliable sources, exposing themselves to unneeded risks. Since information on these dietary supplements is limited, researchers from the University of Texas Medical Branch describe a practical patient-centered approach to managing dietary supplement use in [cancer care](#) in a review article. Improving the communication between patient and doctor in this area is critical. The article was published in the September edition of *Current Oncology Reports*.

Globally, people spent an estimated \$96 billion on dietary supplements in 2012 and the National Institutes of Health devoted \$855 million during fiscal years 2009-2011 to research on this topic. Despite ongoing research, little is known about the effectiveness of dietary supplements in cancer care. Regardless, many studies have confirmed that most patients undergoing cancer therapy use self-selected forms of complimentary and integrative medicine such as dietary supplements.

"Doctors need to understand why patients with cancer use dietary supplements in the first place. Patients tend to use these supplements because they want to do everything possible to feel hopeful, empower themselves, enhance the body's natural defenses, use less toxic

treatments, or reduce side effects of mainstream treatments," said Dr. Victor Sierpina, UTMB professor of [family medicine](#). "In fact, most patients choose to use dietary supplements to improve their quality of life rather than seeking a cure for their disease."

When doctors fail to communicate effectively with patients who are using dietary supplements, they may lose the patient's trust and the patient may gather information from a variety of places, such as advice from friends and relatives or the Internet. At times this information is not correct and occasionally can be dangerous.

Dr. Sierpina and fellow author Dr. Moshe Frenkel, UTMB clinical associate professor of family medicine, emphasize that doctor-patient communication is an interactive process, not merely a focused dialogue of questions and answers. The doctor who is open to patient inquiries and is aware of subtle, nonverbal messages can create an environment of safety in which a patient feels and is protected.

"Doctors must use a sensitive approach when communicating with a patient who has an interest in the use of dietary supplements," said Dr. Frenkel. "A communication approach that fosters a collaborative relationship that includes ample information exchange, empathy and compassion, responding to emotional needs and managing uncertainty can lead to informed decisions about [dietary supplement](#) use."

This discussion is crucial in building a personalized treatment plan that is safe and based on reliable information. This article contains a list of the most common dietary supplements and basic information related to these as well as a table containing reliable sources of information on dietary [supplements](#) for both doctors and patients, for further reference.

More information: *Current Oncology Reports*,
[link.springer.com/article/10.1 ... 07/s11912-014-0411-3](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11912-014-0411-3)

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