

From the Patron's Desk

HERBAL MEDICINES- A REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE TO EQUATE TRADITION TO SCIENCE



The trend towards the herbal medicines in recent year is well established and widely accepted as safe and effective. Many drugs commonly used today in the developing countries are of herbal origin and many of all the modern prescription drugs contain at least one active ingredient derived from plant material, either obtained from plant extracts or derived from natural plant compounds. Herbal medicines are also known as Botanical medicines or Phytomedicines. They are prepared by using mainly herbs or plants, plant parts and plant products with minimal or no industrial processing or chemical manipulations and are used for medical and therapeutic purposes. Herbal medicines are recognized as "the people's medicines" because of their easy accessibility, safety, and the ease with which they can be prepared. Use of herbal medicines in the treatment of diseases has a long tradition of use outside of conventional medicines. This method is now gradually becoming a more mainstream method of treatment in many countries of the world, because improvements the methods of analysis and quality control of herbs and herbal drugs along with advances in clinical research their efficacy and safety are continuously bringing light the value of herbal medicines in the prevention and treatment of diseases.

Herbs include whole plants and plant parts such as leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, stems, woods, barks, roots, rhizomes or other plant parts, which may be entire, fragmented or powdered. The products represent naturally occurring plant-derived substances such as fresh juice, lattices, extracts, gums, fixed oils, essential oils, resins, tannins and dry powders of herbs that processed by various methods likely steaming, boiling with water, roasting or stir-baking with honey, alcoholic beverages or other materials. Herbal preparations include comminuted or powdered herbal materials, or their extracts, tinctures, and fatty oils. They are produced by extraction, steam distillation, fractionation, purification, concentration, or other physical or biological processes. Many parts of the world used herbs as per Ayurveda, Unani and Traditional Chinese Medicine and even today, herbs constitute the principal elements in Unani, Ayurvedic, Homoeopathic, Naturopathic, Traditional Oriental, Native American, and Indian medicines. In the earlier days, herbal medicines were dispensed in the form of simple preparations such as tinctures, teas, poultices, powders, and other herbal preparations where as in recent years Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) is becoming more popular. WHO estimates that in 80 per cent of the world's population, presently uses herbal medicines as CAM for primary healthcare. Based on the demand, extensive research on herbal medicines are in progress towards drug discoveries and also for the commercial benefits. Hence extensive phytochemical and pharmacological researches on medicinal plants and herbal medicines are in place throughout the world and efforts are being made to isolate and identify their active chemical constituents and to substantiate the claims of their efficacy and safety. Scientific evidence from randomized clinical trials is also quite strong for use of many herbal medicines. But, regulations and registration of herbal medicines are not well developed in most countries, and the quality of herbal products sold is not guaranteed. Hence herbal medicines should be brought under legal control in all countries where they are used for medical and therapeutic purposes and efforts should be made to raise public awareness about the risks and benefits of using herbal medicines.

The increased demand of herbal medicines has led to a sudden increase in herbal manufacturing units. The largest number of such manufacturing units is registered as 'pharmaceuticals'. Some other units that are engaged in making plant based cosmetics and food supplements are manufacturers of Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Homeopathic formulations. Looking at the present scenario of herbal world market, Indian herbal market is one of the fastest growing markets with respect to quality improvement of drugs and promotion of exports, doubling the cultivation of medicinal plants by converting existing farmland, continuous focus for R&D on product and process development and effective marketing of herbal products.