THE USE OF HERBAL MEDICINE AND THE INCIDENCE OF POTENTIAL DRUG-HERB INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to identify the incidence of potential drug-herb interactions in a sample of patients managed in the family practice and internal medicine settings.

Methods: One hundred and twenty subjects between the ages of 21 and 75 years taking at least one herbal supplement were conveniently sampled from family practice, internal medicine clinics, and wellness centers and surveyed about their use of herbal supplements, their prescription medications, their knowledge of interactions between the two, and their primary care physician’s awareness of their use of herbal supplements. Of the 120 study participants, 53 met study criteria.

Results: The study population was predominantly female and white with a mean age of 45.5 years of age (SD 23.8). Tobacco use was rare, and alcohol consumption was reported in 38% of the population. The most common medical condition reported by participants was anxiety (34%) with hypertension and arthritis being second most common (28% and 25% respectively). Herbal supplements most commonly used by the study population were Vitamin E (53%), green tea (51%), aloe vera (32%), vitamin C (21%), and garlic (19%), with a mean duration of supplement use of 8 years. A total of thirty-three interactions were identified with a mean of 0.65 interactions per participant. Sixty percent of participants had zero interactions. Thirteen of the 27 had potential drug-herb/supplement interactions with 5 of the 13 having more than one interaction. However, an association between the frequency of potential drug-herb/supplement interactions and whether or not the participants’ physicians were informed (Fisher Exact Probability = 0.199) was not established. There does not seem to be a significant association between gender and whether or not the participant informed his/her PCP (Fisher Exact Probability = 0.139). However, there was a significant association between age and whether or not the PCP was informed (Fisher Exact Probability = 0.012).

Conclusion: Results confirm herbal supplement use is common, and the majority of patients are unaware of potential and risks associated with drug-herb interactions. Over half of the study participants informed their PCP of their herbal supplements use; however, the risk of potential interactions between oral medications and herbal supplements remained high at 48%. There was no significant benefit found for participants who informed their PCP versus those who did not. Study results indicate the incidence of potential drug-herb/supplement interactions is common and that awareness of such interactions is lacking; therefore demonstrating the need for patient and physician education on risks associated with potential drug-herb interactions.