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Herbal Medicine and Kids

Are herbal products safe for children? Read these cautions and know

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(HealthScoutNews) -- If you're like many folks, the first sign of a cold or flu has you running to the drugstore, not the doctor's office. One big reason is the increasing popularity of herbal medicines -- natural, over-the-counter treatments that many adults use to safely self-treat a variety of ills. But do you reach for these same remedies when your child gets sick? If you hesitate to say yes, you're not alone. Experts say even savvy users of alternative medicines feel a bit uncomfortable when it comes to selecting natural products like herbs for their kids. "No one has done the studies on children, so no one knows for sure... there is very little scientific justification guiding" the use of herbs with children, says Dr. Kathi Kemper, director of the Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research at Children's Hospital in Boston. Even so, more pediatricians are incorporating herbal

treatments into their practice, particularly "kitchen" herbs like ginger or peppermint teas for upset stomachs and nausea, or chamomile tea for colic.

When it comes to the more sophisticated products adults take -- like Valerian root for insomnia, or St. John's wort for depression -- most doctors remain cautious about their use in children, however. "My general overall view is that unless a product has been tested scientifically for use in children, I'm very conservative about recommending it to parents," says Dr. Maura Frank, director of the pediatric clinic at New York Weill Cornell Medical Center.

The good news is that with a little common sense and some careful selection, many herbs can be used to safely and naturally treat common childhood ills. The key, doctors like Kemper say, lies not only in knowing what to use, but how to use it.

"The first rule of thumb is to learn proper dosing," says Andrea Candee, one of the nation's leading herbalists who is frequently consulted by doctors on how to treat children with natural medicines.

Candee says the most reliable method for determining how much of any herb to give children

is to use weight -- not age -- as a dosing guide. An adult dose, she says, is based on a weight of 150 pounds. To figure out how much to give your child, divide his or her weight into 150; the resulting percentage is the size of the dose you give.

"If your child weighs 50 pounds, divide 50 into 150, which is three. So the dose is one-third that of the adult dose," Candee says.

For example, if your prescription calls for a cup of herbal tea, and your child weighs about 50 pounds, she would get one-third of a cup. Once you've figured out the correct dosage, Candee says, you should also administer it at the same frequency as an adult dose, not less.

"That's the biggest mistake parents make -- as long as you are giving the child less medicine, frequency should remain the same as in an adult dose," she says.

Next, you need to decide what form of herb to use -- pills, potions or teas.

Doctors say teas are usually your best bet because they can be diluted to the very weakest strength and easily flavored with fruit juices.

Choosing Your Herbs Wisely

Then, think chamomile. It's among the best of the natural remedies you could choose for your child, experts say,

because it's an herb that's not just safe but also versatile.

"Make a tea and compress it on the skin for irritation. Let baby sip the tea in a bottle for colic. Use the tea bags as a treatment for itchy eyes. Put it on gauze, freeze it, and use it for compressing gums during teething -- it is one of the most useful herbs for children," Candee says. Other good choices for kids include peppermint tea for stomach aches, mullein oil for earaches, ginger for nausea, and Echinacea (in herbal extract form only) to help build the immune system and prevent, or shorten the duration of, colds, she says.

Just as important as choosing the right herb for your child is knowing which ones to avoid. Some of the most dangerous products, Kemper says, are known as Chinese or Asian "patent" medicines -- remedies often imported from China or Hong Kong and sold in the United States as herbal blends.

"They are frequently contaminated with heavy metals such as mercury or lead," says Kemper. And about one-third of them also include drugs such as antibiotics and steroids, she says.

Other herbs to avoid giving children include pokerooroot chapparell and anything containing ephedra, a controversial stimulant that, in high

doses, has been linked to severe cardiac and other medical complications.

Frank says parents should also use caution when treating their children with a line of popular natural remedies known as Humphrey's solutions, one of which is often used to aid in teething.

"Some of them contain things that would be very bad, particularly for small babies -- ingredients like bella donna," which is a powerful sedative, says Frank.

Also beware of a natural colic remedy known as Gripewater.

"It's loaded with alcohol - a lot of alcohol -- and it is not safe for children," says Frank.

Although the Food and Drug Administration has outlawed the sale of Gripewater in the United States, it's readily available in Europe where it can be purchased without a prescription.

What To Do

If you're thinking of trying herbal remedies on your child, experts offer these safety tips:

- Always get a diagnosis from your pediatrician first, even if you think you know what's wrong with your child.
- Tell your pediatrician if you plan to try an alternative medicine, and which one.

- If your child's illness is acute -- meaning it occurred suddenly -- limit treatment to three days. If you don't see improvement, seek medical attention immediately.
- Always consult your doctor if your child is in severe pain or if he has a fever higher than 102 degrees, the fever lasts longer than a couple of days, or diarrhea lasts longer than 24 hours.

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