

What seniors should know about herbal medicines

A lifelong commitment to healthy living can improve life expectancy and quality of life while reducing a person's risk for various conditions and diseases, including cancer and heart disease.

Healthy lifestyle choices like eating a nutritious diet and exercising regularly can greatly reduce a person's risk for various ailments, but such choices don't eliminate that risk entirely. As a result, even health-conscious men and women may need to rely on medication to stay healthy. That's especially true for seniors since age is a risk factor for various conditions.

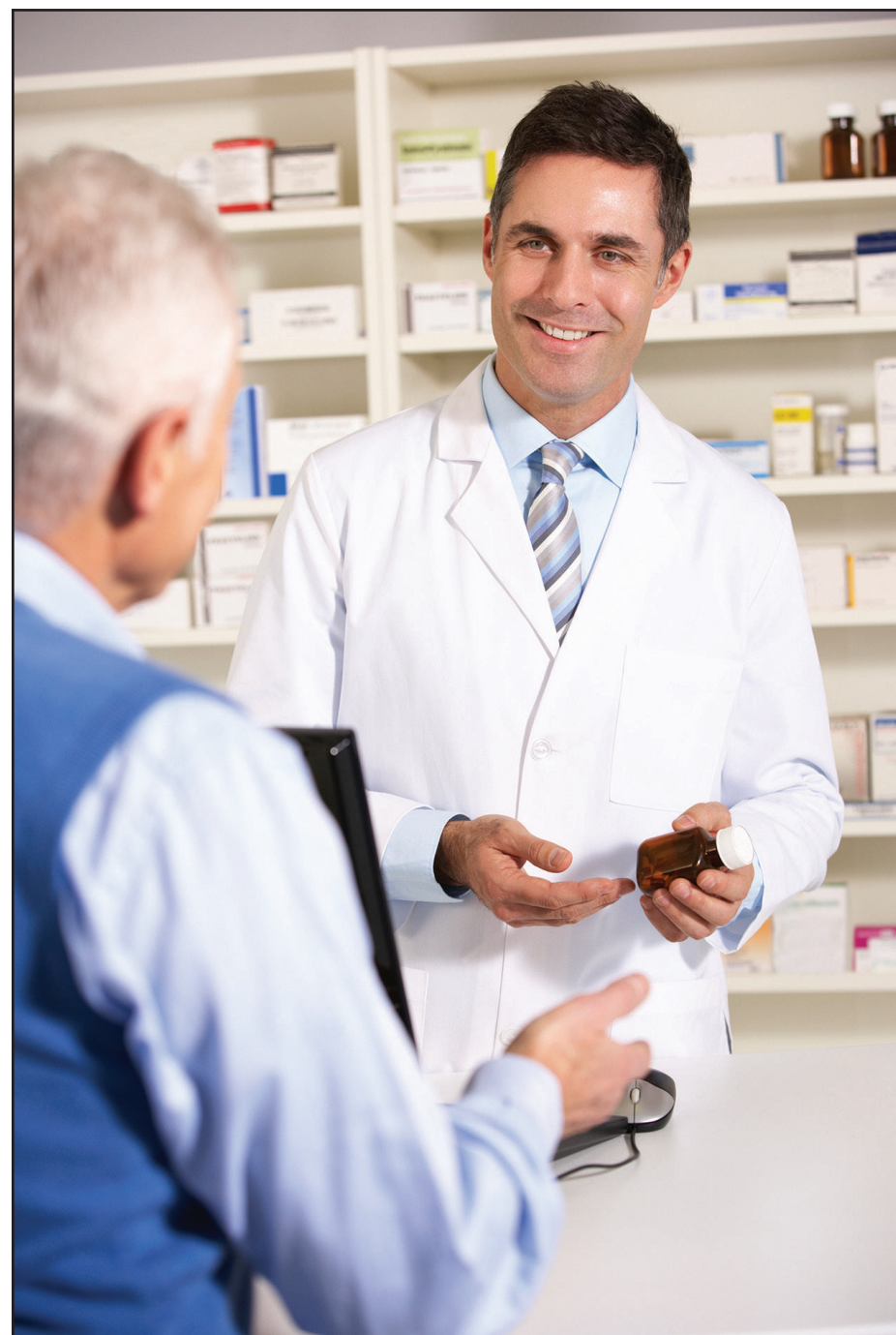
A 2014 analysis that appeared in the Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics examined nearly 1,300 published articles that focused on the use of herbal supplements by elderly patients. Though only 16 of those articles met the researchers' criteria, the analysis concluded that herbal supplement usage is common among elderly patients, as was a lack of dialogue about such supplements between medical professionals and seniors. A concerted effort to initiate such dialogue on the part of both patients and health care providers can help shed light on herbal medicines so people taking them, including seniors, can learn more about what they're putting into their bodies.

What are herbal medicines?

The National Health Service of the United Kingdom, a widely respected and publicly funded health care system, describes herbal medicines as those with active ingredients made from plant parts like leaves, roots or flowers. Because herbal medicines are made from plant parts, many people assume they're safe to take without consulting a physician. However, the NHS urges people to treat herbal medicines with the same care and respect as they would more conventional medicines. Herbal medicines can affect the body in various ways. A frank discussion with a physician can shed light on the potential side effects of herbal medicines and whether or not they're safe.

Why should seniors be concerned about herbal medicines?

The NHS notes that seniors taking other medications may experience problems if they begin taking herbal medicines as well. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, notes that more well-designed studies are necessary to fully evaluate interactions between herbal medicines and prescription drugs. However, the NCCIH notes



that some evidence points to some harmful effects of mixing the two. For example, the NCCIH reports that prolonged exposure to concentrated garlic extracts may reduce the efficacy of some drugs. The potential for these types of interactions should be enough to compel seniors to think twice before taking herbal medicines without first consulting their phy-

sicians. In addition, the NHS has developed a list of various types of people for whom herbal medicines may not be suitable, and that list includes the elderly.

Seniors considering herbal medicines should discuss the pros and cons of such products with their physicians prior to taking anything.