Going for Alternative Medications?

You have lots of company if you use, or are thinking of using, herbal supplements or other alternatives to standard medical care. There are certainly plenty of products, ads, offers and unfortunately scams out there to help you on your way. But did you know that there are good resources to help you figure out the facts from the wishful dreaming? The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, FDA and Consumer Labs are all reliable places to get unbiased information.

The National Center (NCCAM) put out a recent news release saying that over 3 million people looked for information on herbal supplements on their website in the last year! Go to http://nccam.nih.gov/health/herbsataglance.htm to see what these other people were reading. Some of the most frequently researched herbs were evening primrose oil, St John’s wort and fenugreek. They’ve produced a series of fact sheets on almost 50 different herbal supplements from acai to yohimbe. If you got a new electronic book reader for the holidays, you can download their whole series as an e-book to have on hand every time you step into a store to look for a new one. You can check out how good the evidence really is for health benefits, and find the risks.

For instance, did you know that St John’s Wort really doesn’t do any better than sugar pills for helping depression? But while it doesn’t make you feel better, it can interfere with the effectiveness of your birth control pills. That could make some people feel really bad! It also changes how well some heart medications, blood thinners and seizure medications work. On the other hand, ginger really is effective for people with morning sickness and vomiting.

The FDA, while it is not allowed to require pre-testing of dietary supplement products, does keep a list of alerts, warnings and health problems that come from them. These can be found at http://www.fda.gov/Food/DietarySupplements/ . There you’ll find not just the most recent but also previous notices for consumers as well as the warnings they sent to companies about dangerous or risky problems.

Another good resource to keep in mind if you’re buying not only herbals but also vitamin and mineral supplements is Consumer Labs. At http://www.consumerlab.com/ they put a wealth of
information at your fingertips. Why go to them? First, they don’t take ads or funds from any of the manufacturers they evaluate. Secondly, they buy the products they test from the same stores you and I buy from. So what they’re testing is what we would get. And thirdly, when they send the samples to labs for testing, they take the labels off. So the labs don’t know whose product it is that they’re testing.

All of that combined means that the information you’ll find there is very unbiased by companies wanting to sell you their product. What you will find are the reports of the testing they have done, listing by company of which products have what they claim, which have more or less than they say they do. There is also an encyclopedia of hundreds of products. These sections go through the claims, what has good studies to say it really works, and what doesn’t have any proof.

The encyclopedia also covers risks associated with the various products, such as the most you can take of something before you’re likely to get side effects. They also have a section called Warnings, which shows the most recent recalls or food safety warnings issued about various foods and supplement products.

If you want to get your nutrients to protect your health in food rather than pills, here’s a healthy way to start. Bananas and oatmeal have plenty of fiber, the spices contain antioxidants, the nuts have healthy oils, the milk has vitamins and minerals. It’s a great way to start the family day.

**Banana Bread Oatmeal**

3 cups fat free milk          3 Tbsp brown sugar, firmly packed
¾ tsp cinnamon               ¼ tsp ground nutmeg
¼ tsp salt                   2 bananas, mashed
2 cups quick or old fashioned oatmeal, uncooked 2 Tbsp chopped almonds or pecans
Toast nuts by microwaving on High on a plate for 1 minute. Stir and microwave 30 seconds more. Repeat for 30 seconds at a time until they smell toasty and are turning light brown. Combine milk, sugar, spices and salt in saucepan. Heat on medium-high until beginning to boil. Stir in oatmeal, bring to boil, cook and stir until thickened, about 1 minute for quick and 5 minutes for old fashioned. Remove from heat, stir in bananas and nuts. Serve with toppings such as low fat yogurt, fresh fruit or milk. Serves 6.