Herbal Supplement Crackdown

This article which originally appeared in the HCV Advocate, talks about the recent herbal supplement crackdown, and gives pertinent information for those with hepatitis C and liver disease.

March 23, 2015 By Alan Franciscus

On February 3, 2015, the New York State Attorney General's office announced that four major chains (GNC, Target, Walmart, and Walgreens) were selling herbal supplements that could not be verified to contain the labeled substances in the listed ingredients. Worse yet, many of the substances tested and found were not listed on the labels. The letters sent out by the State Attorney General ordered the retailers to immediately stop selling the supplements.

What most people do not realize is that herbal supplements are not regulated to protect consumers. New York state is introducing a bill to regulate herbs and supplements.

In the brands tested only 21% had verified ingredients that were listed on the product label. The remaining 79% contained other fillers that included rice, beans, pine, citrus, asparagus, primrose, wheat, houseplants, wild carrot, and other fillers. These could be potentially dangerous to people with allergies to these substances. Of note, one sample contained only 4% of the particular ingredient that was listed on the label.

The bigger question is: How is a person to know what herb or supplement to trust? There are a couple of options—some require a paid subscription. But the cost could well be worth an investment to make sure that the herbs and supplements are of stated potency and dollar value:

- ConsumerLab.com is a useful resource for herbs (paid subscription required).
- The German E Commission has information about the safety of herbs. However, it has not been updated since 1994, but some still consider the information valid.
- American Botanical Council is a resource for herbs in general and houses an English version of the German E Commission as well as an expanded version issued in 2000 (paid subscription required).
- HCV Advocate has an Herbal Glossary and Fact Sheets that we are in the process of updating.

- Amazon.com sells many books on herbs that provide some information about drug-drug interactions.

Always tell your medical provider of any supplement or herb (prescribed or over-the-counter) that you are currently taking for potential drug-drug interactions.

The Full Prescribing Information for a particular Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved drug lists all the possible drug-drug interactions. For instance, St. John's wort (a common herb) should not be taken when people are being treated with HARVONI or VIEKIRA PAK. All of the 'Labels' can be found here.

While the tests were conducted just in New York State (in 13 regions) it is likely that the same ingredients are similar to store brands found in other states. The tests were conducted using a DNA testing technique performed by Dr. James A. Schulte II of Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y. on samples purchased at the stores from across New York State.

I have copied the information from the New York Attorney's press release about the herbal preparations tested.

GNC
Six "Herbal Plus" brand herbal supplements per store were purchased and analyzed:

- Gingko Biloba, St. John's Wort, Ginseng, Garlic, Echinacea, and Saw Palmetto. Purchased from four locations with representative stores in Binghamton, Harlem, Plattsburgh & Suffolk.
- Only one supplement consistently tested for its labeled contents: Garlic. One bottle of Saw Palmetto tested positive for containing DNA from the saw palmetto plant, while three others did not. The remaining four supplement types yielded mixed results, but none revealed DNA from the labeled herb.
- Of 120 DNA tests run on 24 bottles of the herbal products purchased, DNA matched label identification 22% of the time.
- Contaminants identified included asparagus, rice, primrose, alfalfa/clover, spruce, ranuncula, houseplant, allium, legume, saw palmetto, and Echinacea.

Target

- Six "Up & Up" brand herbal supplements per store were purchased and analyzed: Gingko Biloba, St. John's Wort, Valerian Root, Garlic, Echinacea, and Saw Palmetto. Purchased from three locations with representative stores in Nassau County, Poughkeepsie, and Syracuse.

- Three supplements showed nearly consistent presence of the labeled contents: Echinacea (with one sample identifying rice), Garlic, and Saw Palmetto. The remaining three supplements did not reveal DNA from the labeled herb.
- Of 90 DNA tests run on 18 bottles of the herbal products purchased, DNA matched label identification 41% of the time.
- Contaminants identified included allium, French bean, asparagus, pea, wild carrot and saw palmetto.

Walgreens

- Six “Finest Nutrition” brand herbal supplements per store were purchased and analyzed: Gingko Biloba, St. John’s Wort, Ginseng, Garlic, Echinacea, and Saw Palmetto. Purchased from three locations with representative stores in Brooklyn, Rochester and Watertown.
- Only one supplement consistently tested for its labeled contents: Saw Palmetto. The remaining five supplements yielded mixed results, with one sample of garlic showing appropriate DNA. The other bottles yielded no DNA from the labeled herb.
- Of the 90 DNA test run on 18 bottles of herbal products purchased, DNA matched label representation 18% of the time.
- Contaminants identified included allium, rice, wheat, palm, daisy, and dracaena (houseplant).

Walmart

- Six “Spring Valley” brand herbal supplements per store were purchased and analyzed: Gingko Biloba, St. John’s Wort, Ginseng, Garlic, Echinacea, and Saw Palmetto. Purchased from three geographic locations with representative stores in Buffalo, Utica and Westchester.
- None of the supplements tested consistently revealed DNA from the labeled herb. One bottle of garlic had a minimal showing of garlic DNA, as did one bottle of Saw Palmetto. All remaining bottles failed to produce DNA verifying the labeled herb.
- Of the 90 DNA test run on 18 bottles of herbal products purchased, DNA matched label representation 4% of the time.
- Contaminants identified included allium, pine, wheat/grass, rice, mustard, citrus, dracaena

(houseplant), and cassava (tropical tree root).

Press Release:A.G. Schneiderman Asks Major Retailers To Halt Sales Of Certain Herbal Supplements As DNA Tests Fail To Detect Plant Materials Listed On Majority Of Products Tested.

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