Herbals and Supplements May Cause Liver Damage, Even Death

October 6, 2014

Herbals and dietary supplements (HDS) may be more dangerous to the liver than bodybuilding HDS or medications. Publishing their findings in Hepatology, researchers enrolled 839 people with hepatoxicity as a result of medications or HDS into a prospective trial between 2004 and 2013. The participants were drawn from eight referral centers of the Drug-Induced Liver Injury Network (DILIN).

“While many Americans believe supplements to be safe, government regulations require less safety evidence to market products than what is required for conventional pharmaceuticals,” lead author Victor Navarro, MD, from Philadelphia’s Einstein Medical Center, said in a press release. “With less stringent oversight for herbals and dietary supplements, there is greater potential for harmful consequences including life-threatening conditions.”

A total of 130 of the participants, or 15.5 percent, were determined to have suffered injury to the liver as a consequence of HDS. Out of that group, 45 had injury as a result of bodybuilding HDS and 85 as a result of non-bodybuilding HDS. The remaining 709 members of the study had liver injury as a result of taking medications.

The proportion of liver injuries caused by HDS rose from 7 percent to 20 percent during the study. However, according to Navarro, “Our study group is specific to DILIN centers, and therefore we cannot conclude that liver injury due to herbals and dietary supplements is on the rise in the U.S. Further population-based study of liver injury due to herbal products and dietary supplements is needed.”

While bodybuilding HDS led to a median 91 days of jaundice in young men, it did not cause any deaths or lead to liver transplants. The other HDS cases were mostly among middle-age women. Non-bodybuilding HDS led to death or transplantation in 13 percent of cases, compared with just 3 percent for medications.

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read the press release, click here.

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