

Natural Health Products in Canada

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The use of herbal remedies, traditional medicines, and vitamin and mineral supplements to treat disease and prevent illness is on the rise. With the increased interest among consumers in alternative ways to achieve health, Health Canada is taking a closer look at the use of natural health products in this country.

What is a Natural Health Product?

In Canada, there is at this time no clear definition of a “natural health product” in the Food and Drugs Act. Natural health products may include herbal and homeopathic treatments, vitamin and mineral supplements, and alternative medicines used in other countries.

Are natural health products regulated?

Since they are neither a food nor a drug, natural health products are not regulated in Canada. This means that an herbal mixture or a traditional medicine can make a claim that it will improve health or cure an illness, even if there is no proof that this claim is true. It also means that just because a natural health product is available on the market does not always mean that it is safe for the public.

Health Canada has created the Office of Natural Health Products to recognize the increased use of traditional and herbal medicines, and to develop guidelines that will regulate these products. Once these products are regulated, Canadians will have the freedom of choice *and* be sure that products are safe.

What will regulations for natural health products look like?

The proposed guidelines to regulate natural health products will include rules that will help guarantee the safe use of traditional and herbal medicines.

- A product will need to have a license to be sold in Canada
- The maker of the product will need to produce safety and health data to prove its claims.
- The producers will need to apply for a license for the site where the product is made.
- Good manufacturing practices will be needed to ensure quality and safety of the product.
- Standard labeling of natural health products will be required, where the amount of active ingredient must be specified, and warnings and possible negative effects will be stated on the label.
- There will be a system to report negative side effects, where the company who makes the product will need to keep track of any adverse reaction to the product.

- Research that proves safety of the product will be needed.

At this time, none of these rules are in place in Canada. Therefore, when you buy a natural health product, none of these safety measures apply. Regulations for natural health products in Canada are being developed and will be released soon.

Are some herbal products dangerous?

Yes. Even though herbal products claim to be “all natural”, they may not be safe for everyone. The active ingredient in herbal medicines may interact with some health conditions. Also, some herbals may cause damage to organs, or block the action of prescription drugs.

Before you take any natural health product, always check with a medical doctor, pharmacist, or a dietitian first.

How to Find Out More

Contact the Natural Health Products Directorate of Health Canada by calling (613) 952-2558, or visit their website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/nhpd-dpsn.

For more information on nutrition and healthy eating, please contact the Leeds, Grenville, and Lanark District Health Unit's toll free Health Action Line at 1-800-660-5853 (345-5685) and ask to speak to a Registered Dietitian.

Adapted from the website of the Natural Health Products Directorate www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/nhpd-dpsn.