

# Health supplements hinder drugs, elderly warned

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**About 1.3 million over-65s use alternative treatments that can be harmful alongside their other medication** ANDREW BROOKES/GETTY IMAGES

Older people are at risk of side-effects because one in three take alternative treatments that can interfere with prescription medicines, researchers warn.

Doctors should ask patients about herbal products and dietary supplements such as omega-3 oils which, while often not seen as medicines, can cause problems with the compounds in conventional drugs, they added.

Half of over-65s are on at least five medications, and an estimated 1.3 million use alternative treatments that can be harmful when taken alongside them.

Researchers from the University of Hertfordshire surveyed older people in Essex and north London. Of 149 respondents, 34 per cent had used alternative treatments alongside prescription drugs in the past year, with women more than twice as likely to do so.

On average, people were taking three different supplements, the most common being primrose oil, valerian, Nytol Herbal, garlic, cod liver oil, glucosamine and

multivitamins. People also took an average of three prescription drugs, most often cholesterol-lowering statins and blood pressure medicine.

Half the herb-drug combinations in the study raised concerns about interactions, with several likely to cause “significant hazard”, according to results published in the *British Journal of General Practice*. “GPs should routinely ask questions regarding herbal and supplement use, to identify and manage older adults at potential risk of adverse drug interactions,” the study concluded.

For example, St John’s Wort reduces the effectiveness of amlodipine, a blood pressure drug, while omega-3 oils can affect bisoprolol, another blood pressure medication. Other side-effects are thought to be caused by supplements such as flaxseed and cod liver oil.

Taofikat Agbabiaka, lead author of the study, said: “Considering that up to a third of older adults use herbal medicines and/ or dietary supplements with prescribed drugs, it is important that healthcare professionals routinely ask questions regarding the use of non-prescribed medications.”

Helen Stokes-Lampard, of the Royal College of GPs, said: “Patients should disclose all of the medication they are using, including any herbal drugs.”