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Herbal Sleep Medicines

Many people believe that herbal medications are relatively benign and do not have any side effects. However, pretty much anything with an effect will have side effects. Plus, herbals work because they contain certain chemicals that mimic traditional drugs. These chemicals can interfere with other medications or medical conditions and should always be checked with a physician or pharmacist before taking.

The main problem with herbal sleep medicines is that they are not regulated. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) does not have any oversight over herbal medicines. That means you have to trust the company selling the product to be selling what they claim to be selling. Sometimes the herbs may be contaminated with other herbs. Sometimes the dosing from bottle to bottle or even pill to pill can be very different because the herbs were grown under varying conditions. Plant grown collected from nature may have very different properties than those grown in a greenhouse. The timing of harvests and the amount of sunshine or rain can impact potency. Herbs collected from contaminated places can contain heavy metals and various farming chemicals. Because the companies selling herbals do not have to report to any agencies to validate their products, you have to be extra careful with taking herbal sleep medicines.

Here are a few examples of herbal sleep medicines.

- **Passion flower** leaves and roots (*Passiflora incarnata* and *Passiflora edulis*) were used by the Native Americans for its sedative effect. However, it can interfere with antidepressants such as Prozac, Zoloft, Effexor, St. John's Wort, and may other medications. It contains compounds similar to MAOI's. It may be a mild blood thinner. It should not be used during pregnancy.
- **Valerian Root** may work in a way similar to benzodiazepines which are anxiolytics like Xanax, Valium, Ativan, or Klonopin. Prolonged use can result in withdrawal symptoms and rebound insomnia. It can cause a hangover in high doses.
- **Hops** - yes, the ingredient in beer - is a sedative and hypnotic. It contains an chemical that is stronger than regular ethyl alcohol, the main active ingredient in alcoholic beverages. The body processes it in a way similar to regular alcohol, so excessive use

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could impact the liver.

- **Skullcap** (*Scutellaria lateriflora*) is a mild relaxant used for anxiety and historically rabies. It is a sedative so should not be used with other sedatives like Xanax, Ambien, or alcohol. It has been contaminated with germander in the past, which caused liver problems.
- **Chamomile** flower teas are often used for relaxation. People who are allergic to ragweed or birch pollen may be allergic to Chamomile. It can intensify effects of other sedatives, so should not be mixed with them. It may not be safe during pregnancy.
- **Melatonin** is the only non-regulated drug alternative that has been scientifically proven with multiple research trials to help with sleep. It is most useful in jet-lag situations, where the brain needs a boost of melatonin to get to sleep. Melatonin is naturally produced in the brain to induce sleep. The melatonin pills are laboratory-produced chemicals, again, not regulated by the FDA. Technically it is not an herbal, but it can be found in the same section of the store. It should not be used during pregnancy because it can interfere with other hormones in the body. It should not be mixed with other sedatives or taken with other blood thinning products, including aspirin and ginkgo. Some people will have prolonged sedation the following day.

It is very important to check for drug interactions. Conditions like seizures, epilepsy, alcoholism, depression, anxiety, pregnancy, or breastfeeding are important to consider before trying any herbal sleep medications. Contrary to popular belief, herbals can be just as potent as some prescription drugs, and should be used with at least as much caution.



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