



## Natural Health Products and Breast Cancer

These recommendations provide guidance on the safety of using natural health products. This is a controversial area because of limited amount of scientific information that exists at this time. Please contact your doctor, pharmacist, nurse or dietician for further discussion.

### What are natural health products?

Natural health products are vitamins, minerals, herbs and other supplements that you take on a regular basis as a natural medicine. Often, they are taken in higher amounts than can be obtained through your diet.

### Is there a recommended vitamin and mineral supplement?

A **once daily vitamin and mineral supplement** may be useful if you are unable to eat a balanced diet. A supplement should contain small doses of a wide variety of nutrients (large doses are not recommended). Select a brand that is specific to your age group. For example, brands containing iron are recommended for women who have regular menstrual periods.

A daily supplement of **Vitamin D** is recommended for bone health<sup>1</sup>. For more information, see the Patient Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Osteoporosis listed in the recommended resources below.

### Is it safe to use other natural health products during drug therapy and radiation therapy of your cancer?

There is concern that other vitamins, minerals or herbal supplements may change the effects of your cancer drugs and prevent your treatment from achieving its effect, or increase side effects. This includes medications know as chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy. Therefore, these natural health products are **not recommended** during cancer treatment.

### Are there natural health products that I can use for hot flashes?

Most natural health products used for hot flashes (eg. Soy, Black cohosh, red clover) have hormone like properties. They may stimulate breast cancer growth or reduce the

effect of treatments such as tamoxifen or aromatase inhibitors (e.g., letrozole). These are not recommended outside of a clinical trial or without discussion with your cancer doctor as their safety in breast cancer is not known, especially if your breast cancer is sensitive to hormones such as estrogen.

### **What natural health products have hormone like properties?**

Many natural health products available at drugstores or specialty health food stores may contain ingredients that have hormone-like properties. These ingredients are called phytoestrogens. If you have questions about the natural products or supplements that you currently take or are considering, speak with your healthcare team member.

### **Should I be careful about the food I eat?**

Food sources generally do not need to be restricted during cancer treatment.

The potential benefits and risks of foods such as flax and soy, which contain phytoestrogens, are not clear at this time for someone with breast cancer or those with a history of breast cancer. For more information on diet, please consult with a registered dietician at your cancer treatment centre.

### **Recommended Resources**

<sup>1</sup>See Patient Guidelines for the Prevention of Osteoporosis in Women (BC Cancer website) at <http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/nutrition/nutrition-handouts#Specific--types--of--cancer>

Search products in the database at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center at <https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/herbs>