



# Herb Alert

Mixing and matching natural remedies may be harmful to your health.

Here's what you need to know to protect yourself. by judith springer riddle

**I**N DESPERATE NEED OF an energy boost, Kendell Monroe, 44, a single mom from South Orange, N.J., turned to the fabled elixir Woodroot Tonic. The Jamaican brew—a mixture of herbs such as myrrh, ginger and Chaney Root—would banish her energy problems, her mom promised. “It worked,” says Monroe, who took the herb daily. Then one night, she took a natural laxative called Aloe Lax. She awoke to find her right arm covered in hives. By lunchtime she had a quarter-size blister that felt fiery hot.

Monroe, a finance executive, rushed to her dermatologist, who prescribed an ointment for the blister and explained that the combination of herbal medicines (Aloe Lax contains fennel) caused the rash. Two years later, she still has a scar as a reminder that herbs can not be used without some caution.

It's no wonder that a study conducted by the Hartman Group in 2000 showed that herbal supplements are used by nearly 46,000,000 women each month. Unlike pharmaceutically engineered medications that are designed to produce dramatic results with ease, herbs are said to gently tweak the body toward good health. That may make herbal formulas perfect solutions for hard-to-treat health problems like PMS or the exhaustion that comes with motherhood. Mixing, matching or double-dosing herbs, however, sometimes produces results that are anything but healthy.

In a recent meeting of the American College of Gas-

troenterology (ACG), scientists reported that a 40-year-old woman suffered liver damage after drinking Chinese rice tea regularly to attempt to treat her diabetes. In another instance, a woman developed lead poisoning from ingesting several herbs from India to relieve arthritis.

Extreme cases are rare, promises T. C. Chauhan, M.D., a senior fellow of gastroenterology at Brooklyn Hospital Center in New York. But these reports should serve as a serious wake-up call for people who think herbs are risk-free. “We’ve been led to believe that herbs are natural substances and are completely safe. Fact is, they’re not,” warns Herb Joiner-Bey, N.D., a naturopathic doctor and professor of integrative therapeutics at Bastyr University in Kenmore, Wash.

Kava kava, for example, is actually a powerful depressant. Sticking to the recommended dose is crucial. Echinacea, touted as a near cure for the common cold, is such a potent immune-system stimulant that it can produce symptoms in people suffering from autoimmune diseases like lupus.

## WHO'S MINDING THE STORE ?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates dietary supplements—including herbs, vitamins, minerals and proteins—but only as foods, not as prescription drugs. So supplement manufacturers don't have to prove that their products are safe and effective like their pharmaceutical cousins. Nor do they have to warn consumers of potentially dangerous side effects on product labels. Occasionally, the FDA does catch products that pose a health risk and gets them off the shelves. Just recently, the FDA urged consumers to stop taking all weight-



# Diflucan®

(fluconazole) 150 mg tablet

for vaginal yeast infections due to *Candida*

## Summary of patient information about DIFLUCAN (Di-flū-can), fluconazole (flū-con'ā-zol)

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE USING DIFLUCAN for the treatment of vaginal yeast infections due to *Candida*.

**Pfizer wants you to know as much as possible about your medicines.** The purpose of this summary is to inform you about DIFLUCAN and its use in the treatment of vaginal yeast infections. However, no summary can take the place of a discussion between you and your doctor or other healthcare professional. Your doctor has been provided with full prescribing information for DIFLUCAN, upon which this summary is based. You may want to read it and discuss any questions you may have.

### What is a vaginal yeast infection?

In the vagina, yeast and bacteria live together in a balance that limits the excessive growth of either. When this normal balance is upset for any reason, an infection can occur. Changes within the vagina can be caused by increased moisture, as may happen during prolonged exposure to wet clothing or sweaty exercise outfits.

In addition, some medical conditions and certain medicines can increase the chances of getting a yeast infection. Specifically, the chances of getting an infection are higher in women who are pregnant, diabetic, using birth control pills, or taking antibiotics. Vaginal infections are common, and an estimated 75% of all adult women have at least one vaginal yeast infection in their lifetimes.

Vaginal yeast infections are uncomfortable and may cause itching, burning, and soreness. When infected, the lining of the vagina becomes inflamed (a condition known as vaginitis) and the vaginal area reddens. An increase in vaginal secretions is also common during yeast infections, and some women have a thick, white discharge.

### What is *Candida*?

Most yeast infections are caused by a type of fungus called *Candida*. It is normal for the *Candida* yeast to live in the human body.

**How does DIFLUCAN work against a yeast infection?** DIFLUCAN is an antifungal agent that works by interfering with the yeast's normal growth process. Because of this action, DIFLUCAN effectively cures most vaginal yeast infections due to *Candida*.

### Who should NOT take DIFLUCAN?

DIFLUCAN should not be taken by anyone known to be allergic to fluconazole, the active ingredient, or to any of the inactive ingredients listed at the end of this Summary. Also, you should tell your doctor or other healthcare professional if you are allergic to any other medicines. Do not take DIFLUCAN if you are taking the medicine cisapride (Propulsid).

### How should I take DIFLUCAN and what should I expect?

DIFLUCAN for vaginal yeast infections is a 150-mg tablet that is taken by mouth. Most patients can expect to see the beginning of symptom relief within 24 hours of taking the tablet. As DIFLUCAN works to cure the infection over a period of days, symptoms will gradually lessen and eventually disappear.

DIFLUCAN can be taken anytime—day or night, with or without meals. You should take it as soon as possible, by mouth, to ensure the earliest relief. If the symptoms have not started to go away within 3 to 5 days, you should contact your doctor or other healthcare professional.

### Possible side effects

In US clinical studies of 448 patients taking a single dose of DIFLUCAN for vaginal yeast infections, the most common side effects reported were headache (13%), nausea (7%), and stomach pain (6%). Other side effects reported were diarrhea (3%), indigestion (1%), dizziness (1%), and changes in the way food tastes (1%). Overall, 26% of patients taking DIFLUCAN reported side effects, compared with 16% of 422

patients using vaginal products. You may want to discuss with your doctor or other healthcare professional whether the convenience of a single oral dose outweighs the increased risk of side effects compared with other treatments that are applied directly in the vagina. You should also tell your doctor or other healthcare professional about any side effects you do experience.

### Important warnings and precautions

Follow your doctor's directions about how to take DIFLUCAN, and be aware of the following points:

- If the symptoms of your vaginal yeast infection have not improved within 3 to 5 days, contact your doctor or other healthcare professional.
- DIFLUCAN has not been studied in pregnant women. If you are pregnant, your doctor should prescribe DIFLUCAN only if the benefit to you justifies the possible risk to the fetus.
- Because DIFLUCAN passes into human milk, you should not take DIFLUCAN while nursing.
- Be sure to tell your doctor and other healthcare professionals about all the medicines you are taking—prescription, nonprescription, and vitamins. They know about possible interactions between medicines and are best able to prevent them. DIFLUCAN may interact with certain birth control pills, cimetidine (Tagamet), hydrochlorothiazide, antacids, rifampin, warfarin (Coumadin), phenytoin (Dilantin), cyclosporine (Sandimmune), zidovudine (Retrovir or AZT), theophylline, terfenadine (Seldane), cisapride (Propulsid), astemizole (Hismanal), rifabutin (Mycobutin), tacrolimus (Prograf), and oral antidiabetic medicines. If you are not sure whether you are taking any of these medicines, check with your doctor, pharmacist, or other healthcare professional.
- DIFLUCAN has been connected to rare cases of serious liver damage, including deaths, primarily in patients with serious underlying medical conditions.
- Rare cases of anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction) have been reported, as well as rare cases of a severe skin disorder.

### Cancer and impairment of fertility

Like most prescription drugs, DIFLUCAN was required to be tested on animals before it was allowed for human use. Often these tests are designed to achieve higher drug levels than humans achieve at recommended dosing. In these tests, benign liver tumors were observed in some of the male animals and a complicated labor/delivery was observed in some female animals. Your healthcare professional can tell you more about how drugs are tested on animals and what the results of these tests mean about safety for you.

### Pediatric use

One-dose DIFLUCAN treatment for vaginal yeast infections due to *Candida* has not been studied in children. When multiple-dose DIFLUCAN was used for the treatment of other infections in children up to the age of 17 years, the most commonly reported side effects were vomiting (5%), stomach pain (3%), nausea (2%), and diarrhea (2%).

**Active ingredient:** Each tablet contains 150 mg fluconazole.

**Inactive ingredients:** Microcrystalline cellulose, dibasic calcium phosphate anhydrous, povidone, croscarmellose sodium, FD&C Red No. 40 aluminum lake dye, and magnesium stearate.

**Caution:** Federal law prohibits dispensing without a prescription. You must see a doctor to receive a prescription.

**If you have any questions or want more information about DIFLUCAN for the treatment of vaginal yeast infections, talk to your doctor or other healthcare professional.**



U.S. Pharmaceuticals

DF103446 © 2002 Pfizer Inc. Revised June 1998

loss products containing Aristolochic acid, a compound found in the Chinese herb Aristolochia fangchi, because of its association with liver damage and cancer. FDA scrutiny also put an end to the sale of the herbs chaparral, comfrey and lobelia, which have been associated with cases of liver damage, depression, rapid heart rate, coma and even death.

## PLAYING IT SAFE

Here's what you can do to make sure you get a product that won't cause harm:

**Seek expertise.** "The best thing to do is to sit down with a professional who will prescribe herbal medicine specifically for you," explains Robbee Fian, president emeritus of the American Association of Oriental Medicine (AAOM) in Catasauqua, Penn. To find an herbalist in your area, call the American Herbalists Guild at (770) 751-6021 or contact them online at american-herbalist.com.

**Do your homework.** Before purchasing any dietary supplement, call the company to ask whether each product batch was tested, and if they're a member of the American Herbal Products Association, a trade organization that urges companies to exercise high, ethical production standards.

**Buy domestically.** Products from some foreign countries may be more likely to be contaminated with arsenic, lead and other toxic metals.

**Stick with the standard.** Look for the words "standardized extract" on product labels. A standardized extract contains the maximum percentage needed of the herb's active ingredient to be effective.

**Follow directions.** Never exceed the recommended daily dose and don't use an herb longer than what's suggested. With a little bit of practice, however, you can learn to make Mother Nature's herbal pharmacy work for you. ☺

To find information about the best herbs for women, visit [www.heartandsoul.com](http://www.heartandsoul.com).