



**For Immediate Release  
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## **Herbal Supplements can be Dangerous to Health**

*Experts applaud FDA ban of Ephedra, urge caution when using similar herbal remedies*

**(Chicago)** – Experts at the Illinois Poison Center (IPC) urge consumers to use herbal supplements with caution and only after consulting a physician. This reminder comes on the heels of the recent announcement by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ban ephedra, also known as Ma Huang.

While the IPC applauds the FDA action to remove ephedra from the store shelves, it warns that other herbal nutritional supplements still readily available nationwide pose similar health risks. Such therapies have long been used as dietary aids, or by athletes to increase energy.

“Many people falsely assume that all-natural, herbal products cannot be toxic. This is simply wrong,” said Dr. Michael Wahl, managing medical director, IPC, and a toxicologist. “Though ephedra is being pulled from the market, the reality is that there are dozens of other herbal supplements out there that are being used, or may soon be used in its place.

IPC notes that the following herbal products are potentially dangerous:

- Synephrine, a component of bitter orange. Adverse effects of synephrine have been reported to include hypertension (high blood pressure) and heart problems. Unlike ephedra, no cases of death have yet been reported with synephrine use.
- Guarana. Guarana contains 2.5 to 7 percent caffeine (compared to 1 to 2 percent in coffee) and acts as a central nervous system stimulant, increasing heart rate and blood pressure.
- Yerba maté. Large amounts, or the prolonged use of maté, are associated with an increased risk of cancers of the esophagus, mouth, larynx, kidney, bladder and lung. The caffeine component of mate can cause insomnia, nervousness, restlessness, nausea, vomiting, and fast and/or irregular heartbeat.

Herbal supplements that contain ephedra have been associated with an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, and sudden death. These herbals act much like speed, elevating the heart rate, increasing blood

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pressure and leading to other complex health problems. Such products used specifically as dietary aids and energy-enhancers can be composed of stimulant-containing herbs and become particularly dangerous when taken in large quantities and combined with diet or other energy products with caffeine or a natural caffeine source, such as kola nut, guarana, yerbe maté, or tea.

Ephedra has been linked to more than 100 deaths nationwide, and as many as 18,000 other medical problems. Though recognized as a potential health hazard for several years, ephedra has been a legal herbal supplement, available widely and in many dietary supplement products. The December 2003 federal ban becomes effective 60 days after the government issues a regulation that would make it illegal to sell products containing ephedra.

Illinois became the first state in the country to ban ephedra in May 2003. Since the Illinois ban, IPC officials have been concerned that the product has remained easily available in states surrounding Illinois. In 2003, IPC responded to nearly 570 hot line calls regarding herbal products and workout aids, including ephedra.

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**Editor's Note:** Wahl, who is also an emergency medicine physician, is available for news media interviews. Contact IPC public affairs at 312-906-6146 to arrange to speak with Wahl.

## Illinois Poison Center

### Herbal Supplements: Uses and Concerns

#### Quick Facts

- Illinois became the first state in the country to ban ephedra in May 2003. However, products containing the herbal supplement ephedra continued to be available in surrounding states.
- Federal regulation of the ban is still a few months away – the ban becomes effective 60 days after the FDA issues regulations. Companies that sell ephedra-containing products are still trying to rid their supplies of the products. Now is the time to raise awareness of the associated dangers.
- More importantly, consumers need to know about other herbal products that are still available and have effects on the body similar to ephedra. (FDA currently does not regulate these products.) The IPC's medical directors are concerned, especially as people embark on the ever-popular, new-year diets.
- Other potentially dangerous herbal products include:
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  - Yerba maté. Large amounts, or the prolonged use of maté, are associated with an increased risk of cancers of the esophagus, mouth, larynx, kidney, bladder and lung. The caffeine component of mate can cause insomnia, nervousness, restlessness, nausea, vomiting, and fast and/or irregular heartbeat.
- The IPC received nearly 570 calls in 2003 regarding herbal products and workout aids.