An Acid to Worry Over: Aristolochia

The Little Diet Pill That Killed Aristolochic Acid – And Old-Time Bad Guy

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You have that achy, flu-like malaise from head to toe, and someone offers you a treatment choice: a steamy cup of herbal tea, or a pill – say, an aspirin tablet. Which would you choose? And why?

Well, it’s simple – for everyone knows that aspirin pills are helpful but limited – and they can cause stomach distress. But consider hot herbal tea! Who can comprehend all the benefits of all those herbs and the mystique they carry? Besides, isn’t aspirin a chemical, and aren’t herbs “natural?” So, shouldn’t the choice be clear for most of us? Let’s take a look at the facts.

Exactly what is an herb? And, just because it grows, does that make it safe for all seasons?

Consider this – if a plant-medicine heals illness or brings comfort from pain, malaise, headache, it’s because it has medicinal power. In other words, it contains a naturally-occurring “drug.” So far, so good. But consider what else it may contain. For instance, aristolochic acid.

Some years ago, 100 Belgian citizens who wanted to lose a few pounds were prescribed a Chinese diet pill with disastrous results. So far, seventy of these have required kidney transplants or dialysis. The pills contained aristolochic acid, deadly for kidneys. These were sold as “traditional Chinese medicines.” And in a diet pill, no less!

The experts tell us this: There are at least 600 species of herbs that contain this deadly acid naturally. That is, it’s part of the metabolism of the plant. It belongs there, like fiber in oats or iron in spinach.

Recently, a "Dear Doctor" letter from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to the nation’s physicians contained an urgent warning that these herbs can cause renal diseases. And more, for the danger goes beyond kidneys. Even more scary, we learn that this group can cause (and has caused) cancerous growths in animals – tumors of bladder, lung and stomach. Flummoxed, the FDA fights an uphill battle when trying to regulate the dietary supplement industry. When will our Washington lawmakers quit toying with science and the health of the citizens?

Our friendly neighbor on our northern borders can teach us a lesson or two. Health Canada has issued a warning about herbals that harbor ariscolochic acid. It’s implicit in supplements labeled "Mu Tong" – a term that can refer to many herbs, all of which are used interchangeably in traditional Chinese medicines.

It strikes your HealthWise reporter as especially inappropriate that, in the case above, scores of persons who desired nothing more than to lose a few pounds should have been duped into taking a so-called "food supplement" with such devastating results. Congress, please take note.