

Holding Back on the Herbals



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If you're thinking of trying out any herbal treatments, make sure you talk to your aviation Medical Examiner first. Those seemingly innocuous tablets may be incompatible with flight safety.

Natural remedies sound very appealing, but Dr Rajib Ghosh, a CAA Senior Medical Officer, says they should be approached in the same way that all medications are in aviation.

"People often think that because something is 'natural' it's going to be completely safe with no side effects. And that's not always the case."

Your Medical Examiner is specifically trained in the special requirements of aviation medicine.

"That's why it's important to discuss herbal treatments with your Medical Examiner and not just your GP, or even your clinical specialist," says Dr Ghosh.

"A GP or specialist may prescribe you something in good faith, and it may be the best course of action in normal circumstances. However, without specialist knowledge, the aviation safety implications may not have been considered."

Fatigue management is an example.

"We know most pilots have to manage fatigue at some time. Performing any safety-critical task, like flying, can be challenging when tired. That is doubly so for pilots on early starts, late finishes or shift work."

There are many natural treatments for fatigue management on the market. Some even advertise that it is safe to operate machinery or aircraft while you are on a course of

these treatments. That isn't necessarily true, and exactly why Dr Ghosh says you need to discuss any herbal treatments with your Medical Examiner.

"Some of the ingredients used may not be safe for aviation activities."

However, Dr Ghosh says that it's not always the case that herbal treatments will interfere with standard medicine or, as some believe, are ineffective.

"Just because something is herbal or natural doesn't mean it can't be useful. The important thing is whether there's scientific evidence to back up the claims."

For example, olive leaf extracts have been used for centuries to aid in the treatment of diabetes. But it's only recently that a clinical trial at the Liggins Institute at Auckland University has shown that an extract of fresh olive leaves appreciably reduces some risk factors for developing type 2 diabetes.

If you do want to use a herbal treatment, instead of, or in addition to, standard medicines, discuss that with your Medical Examiner. They will be able to go through the treatment options with you, how your treatment will be monitored, and whether it may affect your ability to keep flying. ■