Ginger, ginseng pose risks

The popularity of herbs continues to grow for reasons both culinary and health-related. Two herbs, ginger and ginseng, are gaining popularity for both uses. But both can do harm as well as good.

Question: What are the reported benefits of ginger?
Answer: The Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database indicates that ginger might be effective in preventing and relieving chemotherapy-induced nausea and some causes of vertigo. But reliable evidence is insufficient to show that ginger is beneficial for migraines or rheumatoid or osteoarthritis.

Q: Are there risks?
A: Ginger might increase stomach acid and decrease the effectiveness of antacids. It also increases the absorption of many drugs and therefore could make it more difficult to regulate drug dosages. For example, ginger might increase the risk of bleeding in people taking blood thinners.

Ginger might also complicate blood glucose control in diabetics. And in combination with herbs such as angelica, clove, garlic, ginkgo, ginseng and red clover, ginger can increase the risk of excessive bleeding.

Q: What about ginseng?
A: The three types of ginseng -- American, Siberian and Asian -- have different potential benefits and risks, but many articles and product promotions wrongly lump all ginseng varieties into one theoretical "super-herb."

Many amazing health claims have been made about ginsengs. Some of these are reasonable but most are not.

American ginseng has been reported to be possibly effective for helping diabetes. Siberian ginseng is possibly effective for decreasing the severity of herpes. Asian (also called Panax) ginseng is possibly effective for enhancing cognitive function, decreasing blood glucose and treating some types of erectile dysfunction. Many other claims have not been validated.

One characteristic shared by all three ginseng varieties is that they can make health conditions worse when taken inappropriately. They can cause excessive bleeding and hypoglycemia, and might affect lab test results, potentially leading to misdiagnoses and inappropriate treatments.

Q: Does it matter if these herbs are ingested in foods or in dietary supplements?
A: Active compounds can vary in herbs, and they can break down during cooking. Active components in supplements can also vary extensively. The best brands are standardized so you get a known dose of active compounds.

The bottom line: Herbs have the potential to help promote and maintain good health in healthy people. But those with specific problems might experience adverse effects. Ask your pharmacist or physician before mixing herbs and medications.