



UCI
Dr Jackson Orem

For many Ugandans, herbal remedies are a familiar part of healthcare. They are accessible, culturally trusted, and often seen as “natural” alternatives to conventional medicine. So when a cancer diagnosis is made, it is not surprising that some patients turn to herbs, either alongside hospital treatment or, in some cases, instead of it. But an important question remains: are herbal remedies safe for cancer patients?

The answer is complex. While some herbal products may offer comfort or help manage certain symptoms, not all are safe, especially when combined with cancer treatment.

The risks

One of the biggest misconceptions is that “natural” automatically means safe. In reality, many herbal remedies contain active compounds that can affect the body in powerful ways. This becomes a concern when a patient is undergoing treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, which are carefully calibrated to target cancer cells.

Certain herbs can interfere with

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how these treatments work. For example, some may reduce the effectiveness of chemotherapy drugs, while others can increase their toxicity, leading to more severe side effects. Herbs that affect the liver or kidneys are particularly risky, because these organs play a crucial role in processing cancer medications.

There is also the issue of dosage and quality. Unlike hospital medicines, most herbal remedies are not standardised. This means patients may not know exactly what they are taking, how strong it is, or whether it has been contaminated. In some cases, products marketed as herbal have been found to contain hidden pharmaceutical ingredients or harmful substances.

Perhaps the greatest danger arises when patients abandon or delay proven medical treatment in favour of herbal alternatives. Can-

cer is a disease where timing matters. Delays can allow the disease to progress to more advanced stages, making it harder, and sometimes impossible, to treat effectively.

Using herbal remedies safely

This does not mean that all herbal remedies must be avoided. Some may help with symptoms such as nausea, anxiety, or poor appetite. However, their use should always be approached with caution and guided by a qualified healthcare professional.

Uganda, through the Ministry of Health under the Natural Chemotherapeutics Centre, supports research and regulation of herbal medicines to ensure they are safe and effective. Members of the public should ensure that any herbal products they use have been approved by the National Drug Authority (NDA).

In addition, the Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI) has started researching herbs that may be helpful in managing cancer, aiming to integrate scientifically validated herbal options into supportive care. These initiatives provide a pathway for patients to safely use herbal remedies alongside conventional treatment.

The most important step for any cancer patient is open communication with their doctor. Patients should inform their healthcare team about any herbs, supplements, or traditional treatments they are using or considering. This allows doctors to assess potential interactions and advise on what is safe.

It is also important to rely on evidence-based care. Treatments recommended in hospitals have undergone rigorous testing to ensure they are both safe and effective. While research into herbal medicine is ongoing, many remedies have not been studied to the same standard, particularly in the context of cancer.

Patients should also be wary of bold claims. Any product that promises to “cure” cancer quickly or without side effects should raise concern. Cancer treatment is rarely simple, and such claims are often misleading.

Family members and caregivers have a role to play as well. In many cases, well-meaning relatives may encourage the use of herbal remedies. While their intentions are good, it is important that decisions are guided by medical advice rather than pressure or anecdote.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute