



How accurate is the groundhog's shadow?

By Mary Beth Ponik
Staff Writer

Did you know the most famous predictor of winter's end is a groundhog named Punxsutawney Phil?

For all but one day a year, Phil resides in a climate-controlled home at the Punxsutawney Library in Pennsylvania. Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, is his BIG day. According to the Punxsutawney Chamber of Commerce, on that morning Phil is placed in a heated burrow under a simulated tree stump on stage at a place called Gobbler's Knob before being pulled out at 7:25 a.m. to make his prediction.

The story goes that on this day the groundhog comes out

of his hole after a long winter of hibernation to look for his shadow. If he sees his shadow, the groundhog considers it an omen of six more weeks of winter weather and returns to his hole. If the day is cloudy and shadowless, the groundhog takes it as a sign of spring and stays above ground.

The Punxsutawney Chamber of Commerce reports that since 1886, the groundhog's seasonal forecasting accuracy is low. Phil's winter predictions have been correct only 39 percent of the time.

This groundhog tradition stems from similar beliefs of early Christians in Europe and their observance of Candlemas Day. For centuries the custom was to have clergy bless candles and distribute them to

the people. This day marked a milestone in the winter, and the weather was important. According to the Christian tradition, if Candlemas Day was cloudy, winter was almost over. However, if Candlemas Day was fair, the winter was considered only half over.

Denise Bazzett, ACC mythology instructor, considers the Groundhog Day story a legend because it is at least partly fictional yet told as if it were true.

"The origins of the story could possibly go back even before the Candlemas Day observances to some actual early myth regarding the seasons and/or fertility," Bazzett said. "I think there may well be a way to determine the season using an animal's shadow, but not by the simplistic way it's

portrayed in the media. As far as the groundhog's shadow predicting the length of winter, though, I don't believe it."

ACC and SAC student Catherine Gilmet said, "My husband's birthday is on Feb. 2 so I'm always aware of the day and whether the groundhog sees his shadow, but I don't put much weight into the prediction."

Despite his poor track record since the first official Groundhog Day in 1886, Punxsutawney Phil's popularity has sky-rocketed. The early observances of Phil's predictions in the late 1880s were conducted in private wooded areas neighboring Punxsutawney. According to the Punxsutawney Chamber of Commerce, today's Feb. 2 event attracts tens of thousands of curious visitors to Gobbler's Knob awaiting Phil's appearance.

According to WGKI FOX 33 meteorologist Todd Simcox, the validity of Punxsutawney Phil's predictions is definitely questionable.

"I, like most people, check out the groundhog predictions, but I don't buy into it," Simcox said. "I think it's just a novelty...something for people to talk about. The way weather has been lately, it could change no matter what the groundhog sees or doesn't see."

Herbal supplements can cause serious health risks

By Lauren Beckeney
Staff Writer

If you are using an herbal supplement as part of a New Year's resolution to achieve a healthier lifestyle, consider this: what you don't know can hurt you.

According to the editors of Consumer Reports, herbal supplements are hot commodities that have generated \$1 billion in revenue for many companies in 1999, alone. In a recent poll of 400 readers surveyed by Good Housekeeping magazine, 60 percent of consumers who use herbal supplements, never share this information with their family physicians. Of those surveyed, 61 percent believed that herbal supplements were beneficial and noticed a marked improvement in their overall health.

In order of popularity, the top grossing herbal supplements for 1999 were: echinacea, ginseng, ginkgo biloba, garlic, St. John's Wort, goldenseal and saw palmetto. St. John's Wort, according to herbalists, has properties that effectively combat depression. Another herbal supplement, ginkgo biloba, is said to improve memory as well as mental alertness.

Dieters have become an important target group in the business of herbal supplements.

The year 1998 saw the Food and Drug Administration ban the weight-loss combination known as "fen-phen"

(fenfluramine/phentermine) from pharmacy shelves due to the risk of potential heart valve damage and a condition known as primary pulmonary hypertension, or PPH. Panicking dieters, desperate to keep weight off that had been lost with fen-phen, flocked to herbal supplements containing ma huang, a powerful bronchodilator that not only elevates blood pressure, but increases heart rate.

Some herbal supplements have the potential to interact with prescription medication. A good example of a potentially deadly interaction involving herbal supplements, according to Consumer Report magazine, is with the prescription drug Coumadin and ginkgo biloba. The combination has the potential to cause severe internal bleeding when taken in tandem. Ginseng should not be used with any medication used to treat diabetes as it has the potential to cause blood sugar levels to dip dangerously low. Echinacea should not be used with drugs that suppress the immune system, as it may render those drugs less effective.

Many consumers wonder:

how can something natural harm us?

Some herbal supplements, because they are naturally occurring, may contain pesticides. Often it can be difficult to determine which herbal supplements are safe and which have the potential to do us harm. In some instances, consumers have been unaware of an allergy to a supplement until it is taken. And, like prescription medications, combining some herbal supplements has been known to be lethal.

So-how can consumers protect themselves?

If you take prescription medication and want to use an herbal supplement, discuss it with your physician. They know your personal medical history and can best advise you.

It is important to remember that the business of selling herbal supplements is just that: a business. Unlike prescription and over the counter medications, herbal supplements are not regulated by the FDA. Because this is true, there are no real standards to assure safety or quality. To put it bluntly, as consumers, we "fly blind" when we purchase herbal supplements in that there are no assurance of anything in this lucrative market.

How do I know which herbal supplements may be hazardous to my health?

Recently, the FDA received several reports regarding supplements that may be responsible to adverse reactions in some consumers. They are: yohimbe, ma huang, chaparral, comfrey, germander, jin bu huan, lobelia, and any preparations containing the combination of magnolia and stephania.

Herbs and herbal medicine

have been used for centuries, throughout the world. In the United States, herbal medicine is in its infancy, but research continues. In 1999, the National Institute of Health created the Office of Alternative Health, and operates under the auspices of the NIH.

While it may be tempting to medicate with herbal supplements, health and well-being is best left to the professionals.

Proper treatment can help diabetics live long, productive lives

By Patrick Moore
Contributing Writer

There are three types of diabetes that can be classified as type one, type two, and gestational mellitus. All of these are a form of diabetes and can have serious effects on the human body if left untreated. Even though diabetes is a serious disease, diabetics can live long and productive lives.

The first type is type one, formally known as juvenile diabetes (even though adults can get it too.) People with type one and type two did not catch this disease from another person. Instead, this disease is caused by damage to the pancreas. The pancreas is a vital organ which contains beta cells. Beta cells produce insulin, a hormone that helps glucose (sugar) enter a cell.

Sometimes, beta cells die. This means a person's pancreas no longer produces insulin. There are different reasons a person's beta cells have died, but for most people with type one diabetes, the immune system makes a mistake and kills a diabetic's beta cells. And without beta cells, the pancreas will no longer produce insulin, which in turn will allow glucose (sugar) to build up in the blood. When glucose builds up in the blood, it can cause two kinds of problems. One, the cells of a diabetic will start to starve for energy causing the person to feel tired and sluggish. Next, high glucose levels over time can hurt a diabetic's eyes, kidneys, nerves or heart.

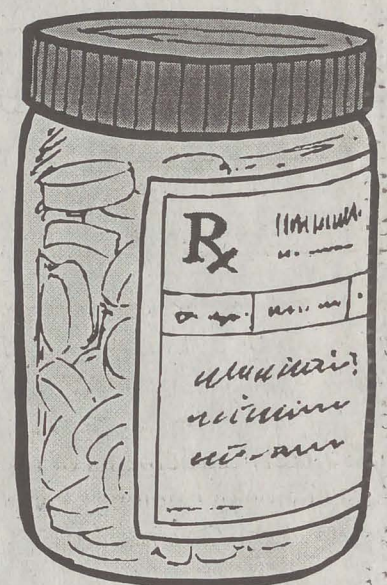
A type one diabetic must

take insulin either through injections or insulin pump. A diabetic must also change his or her eating habits. A good diet is critical for the diabetic. Diabetics must eat a diet low in fat with moderate amounts of protein and high in complex carbohydrates like those found in beans, bread and rice. This kind of diet pertains to both type one and type two.

Exercise is another part that is very important to a diabetic. It does not matter whether he or she has type one, type two or gestational diabetes. A person with diabetes must stay active as possible because this is another way the cells take in glucose. If the diabetic is not used to exercise, they should try a five-minute walk. Even something as simple as riding a bike can lower a person's blood glucose level.

The second kind is type two diabetes. This is where the person's body produces little insulin or the cells ignore the insulin. A person with type two diabetes does not require insulin shots, but may need to take a pill such as Diabeta. Once the diabetic starts taking Diabeta, his or her blood sugar will go down. This does not mean the person is cured. As with all diabetes, there is no cure, but proper diet, exercise and medication can control it.

The last category is gestational diabetes. Gestational diabetes affects about 4 percent of all pregnant women, 135,000 cases a year, according to the American Diabetes Association. Women who have never had diabetes before



but who have high blood sugar levels during pregnancy are said to have gestational diabetes.

Doctors don't know what causes this type of diabetes, but they have some clues. A woman's placenta, which holds the baby in place while he or she grows, contains hormones. These hormones which help a baby grow also interfere with the normal action of insulin in the mother's body. This is called insulin resistance. According to the American Diabetes Association, "Pregnant women who are 25 years or older, were overweight before they became pregnant, have a family history, and who are Hispanic, African, Native, Asian American, or a Pacific Islander, should be screened for gestational diabetes between the 24th and 28th weeks."

If a person suspects he or she might have diabetes, it's very important to seek the advice of a doctor as soon as possible. Even though diabetes is a serious disease, most diabetics live long, healthy and productive lives.

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