Caution always warranted

To sum up, there is good evidence that kava can help in treating mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety disorders in people who are not using alcohol or taking medications metabolized by the liver. There is some evidence for inositol in treating panic disorder and possibly OCD. Some evidence favors 5-HTP for the treatment of anxiety, but safety is a concern. There's not enough evidence to recommend St. John's wort, valerian, and passion flower for anxiety disorders.

Herbal medicines and dietary supplements are not regulated as drugs, so their safety and effectiveness are not established. And there's no guarantee that you're getting exactly what appears on a supplement's label. Herbal supplements in particular can have many active constituents, not all of which have been tested or even identified. If you're considering an herbal or dietary supplement to treat symptoms of anxiety (or any other condition, for that matter) discuss it with your clinician first. If you decide to go ahead, check for reliable brands through independent sources such as ConsumerLab.com, LLC (www.consumerlab.com). For more information about herbal supplements, visit the Web sites of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (http://nccam.nih.gov/health), the Alternative Medicine Foundation (www.amfoundation.org), and MedlinePlus (www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html).

Dietary lutein and zeaxanthin may slow macular degeneration

People whose diets are rich in two substances commonly found in fruits and vegetables have a lower risk of developing advanced age-related macular degeneration (AMD), according to a study published in the September 2007 issue of the Archives of Ophthalmology. Lutein and zeaxanthin are carotenoids, the substances that give fruits and vegetables their deep green, yellow, and orange colors. Both are also found in high concentrations in the macula, the area of the retina that gives us the sharp eyesight we need to read, drive, and recognize faces. AMD occurs when cells in the macula break down. Lutein and zeaxanthin are thought to slow the progression of AMD by helping shield the macula from oxidative damage caused by short wavelengths of light.

Scientists with the Age-Related Eye Disease Study (AREDS) evaluated 4,519 adults, ages 60 to 80, who had some degree of AMD but at least one eye without advanced disease. Study participants were divided into groups by the severity of their symptoms. From the subjects' responses to questionnaires, the researchers estimated their dietary intake of vitamins A, C, and E, lycopene, and the carotenoids beta carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin. Subjects who got the most lutein and zeaxanthin had a 35% lower risk for neovascular (“wet”) AMD, an advanced form of the disease, compared with those who consumed the smallest amount of these nutrients.

Wet AMD, which affects about 10% to 15% of people with the disorder, results from an overgrowth of blood vessels in the macula and can lead to sudden vision loss. The more common but less damaging “dry” form is characterized by deposits called drusen. In this study, lutein and zeaxanthin were also associated with reduced risk for large intermediate-stage drusen and geographic atrophy (late-stage dry AMD). None of the other nutrients studied seemed to have an effect on AMD risk.

In an earlier study, AREDS researchers reported that a supplement containing 500 mg vitamin C, 400 IU vitamin E, 15 mg beta carotene, 80 mg zinc, and 2 mg copper slowed the progression of AMD by about 25%, compared with a placebo. Lutein and zeaxanthin weren't included in the supplement because they weren't commercially available in the 1990s, when the study was designed. Investigators are now starting a new controlled study, AREDS2, which will assess the impact of high doses of lutein, zeaxanthin, and certain omega-3 fatty acids on AMD progression. (An AREDS study published last spring linked omega-3 fatty acids to a reduced risk for advanced AMD.) Participants will be followed for five years. For more information, visit the AREDS2 Web site at www.areds2.org or call 877-273-3780 (toll free).

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Food sources of lutein and zeaxanthin

Egg yolks, corn, broccoli, green beans, yams, brussels sprouts, collard greens, cabbage, kale, spinach, carrots, kiwi fruit, and honeydew melon

What is age-related macular degeneration?

Dry AMD starts with drusen deposits beneath the macula. In wet AMD, abnormal blood vessels grow behind the retina and toward the macula, where they leak blood and damage tissue.