

# 10 Questions to Help You Choose an Herbal Product

*Do you know where your herbs are from?*

*Do you know why it matters?*



Any **herbal product is only as good as the raw materials with which it is made** and how those materials are handled at each step of the process.

Yet many finished product companies can't trace the herbs in their products to the source. As a consumer, what certifications or information help you distinguish between products made with genuine care and those hastily produced with low-quality ingredients? Can you trust the claims made on the label?

Experienced retailers, practitioners, and even word-of-mouth guidance can help you find quality products, but doing your own research and speaking to companies directly is crucial. Find brands that you know and trust and support them through your purchasing.

*Use these questions as a guide.*

# Formulation & Production

## 1 Who is involved in formulation and production?

Who formulates your products? What is their experience? Are they experienced herbalists, clinicians, or researchers? Have the formulas been subjected to clinical trials? Are they based on research or human experience?

## 2 How does the company ensure the product is safe and will deliver the expected benefits?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) sets good manufacturing practices (GMPs) that dietary supplement manufacturers must follow to help ensure the identity, purity, strength, and composition of their dietary supplements.

Current Good Manufacturing Practices (cGMPs) cover everything from recordkeeping to testing and facility maintenance. They ensure consistency, processes to reduce risk, and more. Safety begins with using safe ingredients. Third-party certifications (NSF, ISO, or UL) can add an extra layer of trust to FDA standards. Keep in mind that none of these systems is fail-safe. Whether companies manufacture in-house or use a partner facility (contract manufacturer), they should be able to explain how they check for contamination, ingredient identity, and potency. Companies with repeated FDA violations receive warning letters published on the FDA website, which can be accessed here.

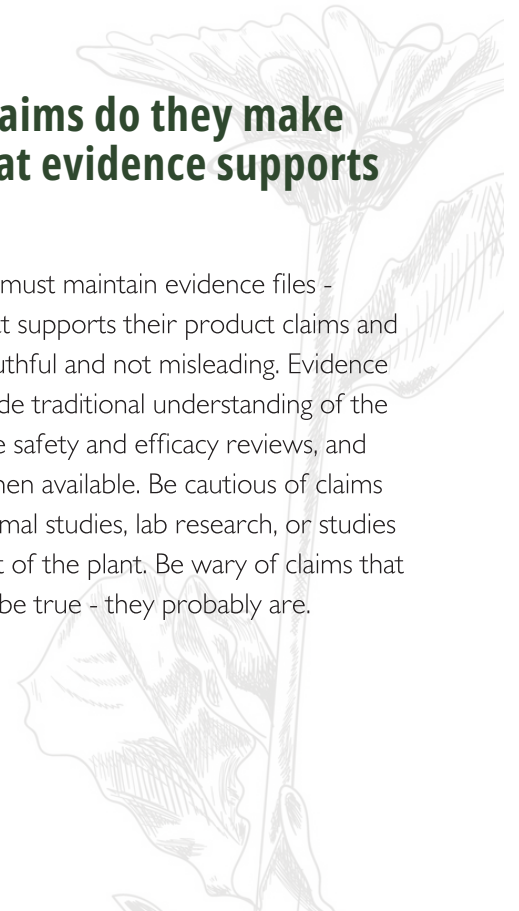
## 3 How do companies ensure their products are what they say they are and aren't contaminated?

By law, every finished lot must be tested, though expense may limit testing frequency. Testing may be done in-house, by a co-manufacturer, or by an independent third-party laboratory. Key testing areas to look for include:

- ✿ Identity: How do they ensure the accurate identification of product ingredients?
- ✿ Microbial pathogens: What are your procedures to ensure your products are free of pathogenic microbes? If ingredients are subjected to sterilization, what techniques do they use and how do they ensure the material is not degraded by the sterilization process?
- ✿ Heavy metals: What are your standards regarding heavy metals? How do you test for these?
- ✿ Adulteration: How do you prevent adulteration of ingredients?

## 4 What claims do they make and what evidence supports them?

By law, companies must maintain evidence files - documentation that supports their product claims and proves they are truthful and not misleading. Evidence should ideally include traditional understanding of the herbs, authoritative safety and efficacy reviews, and clinical research when available. Be cautious of claims based solely on animal studies, lab research, or studies that use only a part of the plant. Be wary of claims that seem too good to be true - they probably are.



## Transparency

### 5 Are certifications independently verified?

Look for product certifications but beware of fake or meaningless quality seals. Third-party certifications provide independent verification by an outside organization that regularly audits the company's practices and goes beyond a brand's sustainability claims. An independent certification should be prioritized over one put out by the company itself.

### 6 Are your herbs certified organic?

Ideally, companies know the source of the plants used in their products and have relationships with suppliers. Yet transparency is expensive and time-consuming and most companies can't trace the material to the source. Certifications help fill this gap.

Certified organic means the material was produced without synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers, and that it is GMO-free. Organic agriculture is a production system that more broadly invests in farming practices that regenerate the health of soils, ecosystems, and people. Organically certified goods require a transparent chain of custody which means that there is a paper trail requiring companies to be able to trace herbs to the source even if they don't directly know those suppliers.

### 7 Are the herbs wild-harvested or cultivated?

**WILD HARVESTED:** If they're wild-harvested, look for Fair Wild certification. If unavailable, look up the company website and contact them to ask how companies ensure sustainable harvesting and fair compensation for skilled harvesters. Do they have wildcrafting standards? Do they work directly with wild crafters or get the material from others? Ask specifically how the company knows these practices are followed.

**CULTIVATED:** If they're cultivated, ask about farming practices. Are the plants grown in ways that actively build and maintain healthy soils and healthy ecosystems? Conventional and organic farming methods have different impacts on the environment and people. Choosing organic leads to a smaller carbon footprint, conserves and builds soil health, replenishes natural ecosystems for cleaner water and air, and doesn't leave pesticide residues. Again, ask how the company knows these practices are followed.



## Ethics

### 8 Are the plants threatened or at risk?

Some herbs, especially wild ones, are in trouble due to over harvesting, habitat loss, or climate change. Check if a plant is on an at-risk list (check the [IUCN Red List](#) or [CITES](#) to confirm). The United Plant Savers [At Risk List](#) or [TRAFFIC's WildCheck](#) list can also be good sources of information. Ask companies how they ensure that these plants aren't being over-harvested. If you need a threatened herb, try to choose cultivated sources or consider an alternative plant with a similar action.

### 9 Is the company ethical and fair to people?

Those who are well paid are more likely to bring care and attention to their work than those who are not. Look for fair trade certifications ([Fair for Life](#) and [Fair Wild](#) are the most common in the herbal products sector) and ask companies directly about how they ensure a living wage and follow fair trade practices. Companies can follow the principles of Fair Trade even if they aren't certified. Other certifications you can look for include [Regenerative Organic Certification](#), which promotes soil health and social well-being, and [B-Corporation status](#), which demonstrates commitment to environmental and social responsibility.

### 10 What additional initiatives support people and the planet?

Beyond certifications, ask about the company's projects and initiatives that support environmental or social causes. These inquiries reveal a company's values and their commitment to giving back to communities they work with. Companies that tend to invest in these broader initiatives generally care about the quality of their products.

Start with curiosity, not perfection.

There's rarely just one "right" answer to these questions. But asking these simple questions and listening to how customer service representatives respond can give you key insights into picking herbal products that are aligned with your health and your heart. To help get you started, we've included [a list of companies that are part of the Sustainable Herbs Initiative](#).

Check out the [Institute for Natural Medicine](#) for free expert guidance on whole-person and natural approaches to your health. Also consider consulting a trained herbalist or a complementary and integrative healthcare practitioner with herbal medicine training.

