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Chinese Medicine & Herbal Product Safety in Singapore

Labels, interactions, purchasing, product identity and safer conversations with healthcare professionals

Table of contents

Labels, interactions, purchasing, product identity and safer conversations with healthcare professionals

Before you begin	3
Chinese Proprietary Medicines in Singapore: What the Label Can Tell You	4
Buying Chinese Medicine Safely in Singapore: Practical Checks Before You Pay	5
Herbs, Medicines & Supplements: Why a Complete List Matters	5
Chinese Herbs: Questions to Ask Before Taking a Formula	6
Food Therapy Is Not the Same as Medical Treatment	8
TCM and Conventional Medical Care: Using Both Responsibly	9
Your First TCM Consultation in Singapore: What to Expect	11
Practical consultation checklist	13
References & further reading	13

This guide is designed to be read, saved and shared. It uses practical language, keeps TCM terminology in context and clearly separates general education from symptoms that need medical assessment.

Before you begin

“Herbal” and “traditional” do not mean every product is regulated in the same way or appropriate for every person. This guide helps Singapore readers identify what they are taking, read labels more carefully, avoid exaggerated claims, disclose medicines and supplements, and make safer purchasing and consultation decisions.

What this book is designed to do

A practical reading approach

- Explain the topic in plain language without turning TCM terminology into a biomedical diagnosis.
- Help you notice useful patterns: timing, triggers, medicines, habits, associated symptoms and change over time.
- Show where everyday self-care may be reasonable and where medical review should come first.
- Make consultation more useful by helping you arrive with clearer information and questions.

A safety note

Emergency or red-flag symptoms come before complementary care. Tell healthcare professionals about prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, herbs, supplements, pregnancy, allergies and important chronic conditions.

CHAPTER 01

Chinese Proprietary Medicines in Singapore: What the Label Can Tell You



A practical introduction to product identity, directions, cautions and why “traditional” does not mean interaction-free.

Start by identifying what kind of product you are holding

In Singapore, Chinese Proprietary Medicines are finished medicinal products such as pills or capsules containing ingredients documented for TCM use. Food-like products and supplements can fall under different regulatory categories, so do not assume every herbal-looking item is regulated in the same way.

Read the name, ingredients and directions before the marketing

Check the product name, listed ingredients, dose instructions, warnings, manufacturer or dealer information and expiry details. Marketing claims should never replace the basic question: what exactly am I taking?

Tell practitioners and doctors about all products

Herbal products can matter when you take prescription medicines, are pregnant, have liver or kidney disease, are preparing for surgery or use multiple supplements. A complete list helps both conventional and TCM practitioners make safer decisions.

Beware of “instant”, “guaranteed” and very broad cure claims

Products claiming to cure many unrelated conditions quickly deserve caution. Responsible health communication acknowledges limits and does not pressure you to stop prescribed medicines.

Storage and duration matter too

Keep products according to label instructions, away from inappropriate heat or moisture, and do not continue indefinitely simply because something is “natural”. Ask how long it is intended to be used and when it should be reviewed.

Report unexpected reactions

If a product appears to cause an unexpected or significant reaction, stop and seek appropriate advice. Bring the packaging so the exact product can be identified.

CHAPTER 02

Buying Chinese Medicine Safely in Singapore: Practical Checks Before You Pay

A consumer checklist for product identity, exaggerated claims, online sellers and when professional advice matters.

Buy the product, not the promise

Start with what the product actually is, who supplies it, the ingredients and directions. A dramatic testimonial or “secret formula” story does not tell you whether a product is appropriate or safe.

Be cautious with anonymous online sellers

Products obtained from unknown overseas sellers can be harder to verify. If something arrives without clear labelling, supplier information or usable instructions, the uncertainty itself is a reason to pause.

Avoid products that promise impossible breadth

One product claiming to cure pain, diabetes, cancer, sexual problems, weight issues and many unrelated conditions should raise concern. Responsible products and practitioners do not need universal cure claims.

Special situations deserve professional review

Pregnancy, children, older adults with multiple medicines, chronic liver or kidney disease and people preparing for surgery should avoid casual trial-and-error with medicinal products.

Keep receipts and packaging

If you need advice later, the exact product matters. Keep the label, batch information and seller details rather than transferring pills into an unmarked container.

Use HSA and professional sources when uncertain

Singapore’s Health Sciences Authority provides information on Chinese Proprietary Medicines and safety alerts. For individual suitability, ask a qualified healthcare professional rather than relying only on social-media claims.

CHAPTER 03

Herbs, Medicines & Supplements: Why a Complete List Matters



How to make TCM and conventional care safer by keeping every prescriber informed about what you take.

“Natural” is not the same as “inactive”

Herbs and supplements can have physiological effects. That is exactly why people take them - and why interactions, side effects or duplicate ingredients are possible.

Make one master list

Include prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, vitamins, supplements, herbal formulas, teas used medicinally and occasional products. Add dose and frequency where possible. Keep the same list for your doctor, pharmacist and TCM practitioner.

Certain situations deserve extra caution

Pregnancy, breastfeeding, liver or kidney disease, blood-thinning treatment, cancer therapy, seizure medicines, transplant medicines and planned surgery are examples where additional review may be important.

Do not stop prescribed treatment on your own

If someone recommends stopping a prescribed medicine solely to begin a supplement or herbal formula, involve the original prescriber. Coordination is safer than forcing the two systems to operate separately.

Watch for duplicate ingredients and changing products

Combination products can contain many ingredients. Taking several products at once can make it difficult to know what caused a reaction. Change one thing at a time where clinically appropriate and keep the packaging.

Bring the actual product when names are unclear

Brand names and translated herb names can be confusing. A photograph or original package often provides more useful information than trying to remember a name phonetically.

CHAPTER 04

Chinese Herbs: Questions to Ask Before Taking a Formula

Learn why medication lists, allergies, pregnancy, supplements and ongoing medical care should be discussed before using herbal products.

Start with your full medication list

Herbs and supplements can interact with medicines or duplicate ingredients. Tell the practitioner about prescription drugs, non-prescription medicines, vitamins, supplements and products from other clinics.

Share important health information

Pregnancy, breastfeeding, allergies, kidney or liver problems and upcoming surgery can affect what may be appropriate. Do not assume a product is suitable simply because it is described as natural.

Understand the product

Ask what you are taking, how much to use, how often, for how long and what reactions should prompt you to stop. Keep the original packaging and directions where possible.

Do not delay necessary medical care

Persistent, severe or worsening symptoms deserve proper assessment. Traditional products should not be used to postpone urgent or necessary conventional medical care.

Tell the practitioner what is already in your body

Bring the names or photographs of prescription medicines, over-the-counter products, vitamins, supplements and other herbal products you take. Include allergies and previous reactions. Pregnancy, breastfeeding, liver or kidney disease and other significant conditions can change what is appropriate. This information is not an inconvenience; it is part of making herbal decisions more safely.

Natural is not the same as automatically safe

A plant-derived ingredient can still have physiological effects, interact with medicines or be unsuitable for a particular person. Product quality also matters. HSA advises consumers to be cautious of dubious products, exaggerated claims and products that may contain undeclared potent medicinal ingredients. Use reputable sources and avoid buying purely on testimonials or “quick cure” promises.

Know what you are taking and why

Ask what the formula or product is intended to support, how it should be taken, what symptoms should lead you to stop and seek advice, and when it should be reviewed. Keep your doctor informed when you are receiving ongoing medical care, especially if new medicines are started or doses change.

Singapore regulates health products, but consumers still need judgment

Health Sciences Authority guidance is an important reference for product safety. Products promoted online or through informal channels can still carry exaggerated claims, undeclared ingredients or quality concerns. A professional label, celebrity testimonial or the word “natural” is not proof that a product is suitable for you. Use reputable sources and be cautious of products promising rapid cures for many unrelated conditions.

A prescription should be understandable

You do not need to memorise every herb, but you should know whether you are taking a customised formula, a proprietary product or a supplement, how often to take it and for how long. Ask what the main purpose is and when the prescription should be reviewed. If the plan changes, keep the most recent instructions rather than relying on an older packet or a family member’s advice.

Interactions are not limited to prescription medicines

Over-the-counter painkillers, cold remedies, vitamins, supplements, traditional products and alcohol can all matter. Bring photographs of labels if remembering names is difficult. If a doctor starts a new medicine while you are using Chinese medicine, tell the TCM practitioner; if a TCM prescription changes, tell the doctor or pharmacist when relevant.

Stop and seek advice when a reaction is concerning

Unexpected rash, swelling, breathing difficulty, severe vomiting, fainting, yellowing of the eyes or skin, marked worsening of symptoms or other serious reactions deserve prompt medical attention. Do not keep taking a product simply because someone tells you that discomfort means the body is “detoxing”. Serious or persistent reactions need assessment.

Do not share personalised prescriptions casually

A formula prepared for one person may not be appropriate for a spouse, parent or friend with a similar-sounding symptom. Differences in medicines, pregnancy, allergies, chronic disease and the underlying cause matter. Sharing leftovers also makes it harder to know exactly what was taken if an adverse reaction occurs.

Storage and labels help prevent simple mistakes

Keep products in their original labelled containers where possible, away from children, heat and moisture. Do not mix several powders into an unlabelled jar or keep old packets without dates. If a reaction occurs, being able to identify exactly what you took makes medical assessment easier. Discard products that are expired, contaminated, badly stored or no longer clearly identifiable.

Children, pregnancy and frailty deserve extra caution

Dosing and suitability can change substantially for children, pregnancy, breastfeeding, older adults and people who are frail or have impaired liver or kidney function. Do not assume that a smaller amount of an adult product is automatically appropriate for a child. These situations deserve individual assessment, careful product selection and clear instructions.

CHAPTER 05

Food Therapy Is Not the Same as Medical Treatment



A clear explanation of what TCM-informed food choices can and cannot reasonably do.

Key points

- Food supports health, but meals should not be sold as cures for serious disease.
- Medical diets and medicine interactions take priority when relevant.
- Use TCM food traditions as an additional lens, not a reason to ignore balanced nutrition.

Food has an important job already

Meals provide energy, protein, vitamins, minerals, fibre and enjoyment. A balanced diet supports long-term health without needing every ingredient to have a therapeutic claim. HealthHub emphasises variety, balance and moderation.

Traditional food language can still be useful

TCM food therapy often talks about warming, cooling, moistening or supporting digestion. These ideas can be part of cultural food choices and personal comfort. They should be presented as traditional concepts rather than laboratory diagnoses.

Do not replace necessary treatment with recipes

Food cannot replace antibiotics when they are medically needed, emergency treatment, insulin or other prescribed care. People with kidney disease, diabetes, swallowing problems, severe food allergy or other medical needs may require specific dietary advice.

Avoid unnecessary restriction

If a list of “forbidden” foods becomes longer and longer, nutrition can suffer and eating can become stressful. Elimination diets should have a clear reason and an appropriate plan for reassessment.

A sensible Shande approach

Use food guidance to make ordinary meals more thoughtful: regular timing, balanced portions, adequate hydration and ingredients that suit the person. If symptoms persist, the next step is assessment, not simply adding more dietary rules.

CHAPTER 06

TCM and Conventional Medical Care: Using Both Responsibly

A safety-first guide to communication between healthcare providers and situations that require urgent conventional medical attention.

Tell each provider what you are using

Good communication reduces avoidable risks. Tell your TCM practitioner about your medical diagnoses, prescriptions and hospital care, and tell your doctor or pharmacist about herbs, supplements and TCM products.

Do not stop prescribed treatment on your own

If you are considering changing a prescription medicine, discuss it with the clinician who prescribed it. Stopping some medicines suddenly can be dangerous.

Keep records

A simple list of medicines, supplements, allergies and recent tests makes it easier for different providers to understand your care.

Recognise emergencies

TCM clinics are not emergency departments. For severe or sudden symptoms, difficulty breathing, major bleeding, stroke-like symptoms or loss of consciousness, call 995 or seek urgent conventional care.

You do not have to choose one side

Many people use TCM while also seeing a GP, specialist, physiotherapist or other healthcare professional. The safest approach is transparency. Tell each provider what medicines, herbs, supplements and treatments you are using. This allows interactions, duplicated treatment and conflicting advice to be considered rather than hidden.

Different systems answer different questions

A TCM pattern description and a biomedical diagnosis are not interchangeable. One may be used to organise treatment within the TCM framework, while the other may rely on examination, imaging, laboratory tests or established diagnostic criteria. Keeping those roles clear reduces confusion and prevents traditional terminology from being mistaken for proof of organ disease.

Urgent care is not a competition

Chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, stroke-like symptoms, major trauma, uncontrolled bleeding, loss of consciousness and other emergencies need immediate conventional medical care. Complementary treatment can be reconsidered after urgent problems are stabilised. Responsible TCM should never require delaying emergency assessment.

Give both sides the same medication list

One of the simplest safety habits is to keep a current list of prescription medicines, non-prescription products, vitamins, supplements and Chinese medicines. Show the same list to your doctor and TCM practitioner when relevant. This reduces the chance that each provider is working with only half the information.

Test results do not lose importance because you use TCM

Blood tests, imaging and specialist diagnoses can answer questions that traditional pattern assessment cannot. If a doctor has identified diabetes, anaemia, a fracture, infection or another condition, do not replace that information with a TCM label. Traditional care may still be discussed as complementary support, but the established diagnosis remains important for safety and planning.

Chronic disease needs coordination, not secrecy

People with high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney or liver disease, cancer, heart disease and other chronic conditions may still be interested in TCM. The safest approach is coordinated disclosure. Some herbs, supplements or changes in diet may affect medicines or laboratory results, so your treating medical team should know what you are using.

Do not stop prescribed medicine because of a broad promise

Be cautious if anyone tells you to stop essential medicine immediately because a complementary treatment can “replace” it, especially without speaking to the prescriber. Changes to long-term medication often need monitoring and should be made with the healthcare professional responsible for that treatment.

The best integration is practical

Integrated care does not require both systems to agree on every theory. It requires each to stay within its strengths, communicate clearly and avoid delaying necessary care. A patient should be able to use TCM for appropriate goals while still receiving vaccinations, screening, emergency care, surgery, medicines or rehabilitation when those are needed.

Preventive care still matters

Using TCM does not remove the value of vaccination, cancer screening, blood pressure checks, diabetes monitoring, dental care or other preventive services appropriate for your age and risk. Complementary care works best when it sits beside, rather than replaces, routine prevention and evidence-based follow-up for known conditions.

Transitions are the moments to communicate again

Hospital discharge, surgery, a new specialist, pregnancy, a new diagnosis or a major medicine change are good times to update every practitioner involved. Information that was

safe six months ago may no longer be enough. Repeating your current medicine and supplement list during these transitions can prevent avoidable misunderstandings.

CHAPTER 07

Your First TCM Consultation in Singapore: What to Expect



A practical guide to preparing for a TCM consultation, what information to bring and what a careful assessment may involve.

Before you go

Write down your main concern, how long it has been present and what makes it better or worse. Bring a list of prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines and supplements. Relevant medical reports can also help the practitioner understand context.

What the practitioner may ask

A TCM consultation may include questions about sleep, appetite, digestion, energy, temperature preferences and other patterns in addition to the main complaint. The purpose is to understand the person as a whole rather than to rely on one symptom alone.

What you should ask

Ask what the practitioner is considering, what the proposed approach involves, how long a session takes, what it costs and whether there are reasons it may not be suitable for you.

When conventional medical care comes first

Sudden severe symptoms, chest pain, difficulty breathing, loss of consciousness, major bleeding, stroke-like symptoms or rapidly worsening illness require urgent conventional medical attention. Call 995 in an emergency.

What makes a first consultation useful

The first visit does not need to produce a dramatic answer in a few minutes. A useful consultation should help you organise the problem: what you are experiencing, how long it has been happening, what has already been investigated, what medicines or supplements you use, and what you hope to improve. If a recommendation is made, you should understand what it is intended to support, what practical limits apply and when the plan should be reviewed.

Bring the information that prevents guesswork

A medicine list, allergy information, recent medical reports and a short timeline of symptoms can save time. For recurring problems, note what makes symptoms better or worse and whether sleep, meals, stress, movement or menstrual cycle changes are relevant. You do not need to stop conventional treatment before seeing a TCM practitioner; in fact, accurate information about current care makes the consultation safer.

Questions you are allowed to ask

Ask why a particular treatment is being suggested, whether there are alternatives, what sensations or side effects may occur, how many sessions should pass before reviewing progress, and whether anything should be discussed with your doctor or pharmacist. A responsible consultation should make room for questions rather than relying on authority alone.

Prepare a one-minute summary before you arrive

A useful first sentence is simple: what the main problem is, when it started, how often it happens and what you most want help with. Then add the information that changes decisions - major diagnoses, current medicines, allergies, pregnancy where relevant, recent procedures and important test results. This gives the practitioner a clear starting point without requiring you to remember every detail in perfect order.

Tongue and pulse are part of the TCM framework

Some TCM consultations include looking at the tongue and feeling the pulse at the wrist. These observations are interpreted within traditional diagnostic frameworks. They are not substitutes for blood tests, imaging, physical examination or a biomedical diagnosis when those are needed. If a traditional term sounds like the name of a modern organ disease, ask the practitioner to explain exactly what is meant.

A treatment plan should have a review point

Whether the recommendation is acupuncture, Tuina, Chinese medicine, lifestyle advice or a combination, ask how progress will be judged. A useful plan has a realistic review point rather than continuing indefinitely without reflection. Improvement might mean sleeping longer, walking farther, having fewer headache days or relying less on rescue medication - the goal should be concrete enough that both you and the practitioner can discuss whether the approach is worthwhile.

Tell the practitioner when something changes

New medicines, a new diagnosis, pregnancy, surgery, a fall, worsening symptoms or an unexpected reaction can change what is appropriate. Do not assume the information you gave months ago is still enough. Updating the practitioner is especially important when herbs, supplements or manual treatment are involved, because safety decisions depend on your current situation.

Leave with an explanation you can repeat

Before leaving, you should be able to explain in plain language what is being recommended, what it is intended to support, how often to use it, what normal reactions might occur, what warning signs matter and when to review. If you cannot explain the plan back to yourself, ask again. Clear communication is not a luxury; it is part of responsible care.

What a follow-up visit should clarify

A follow-up should not simply repeat the first appointment. It should compare what changed, what did not, whether any new symptoms appeared and whether the original goal still makes sense. If treatment has been tried, describe what happened between visits rather

than only how you feel at that moment. This helps distinguish a temporary good day from a consistent trend and gives both sides a reason to continue, modify or stop a plan.

When it is reasonable to pause or seek another opinion

If you do not understand the explanation, feel pressured into a long package, are repeatedly told that worsening symptoms are always a good sign, or are discouraged from obtaining necessary medical assessment, it is reasonable to pause. A second opinion can be useful when the diagnosis is unclear, the recommended course is unusually long or expensive, or your condition is changing in a way that has not been adequately explained.

Practical consultation checklist

- What is the main concern, and when did it start?
- What clearly makes it better or worse?
- Which medicines, supplements or herbs are you taking?
- Are there allergies, pregnancy considerations or chronic conditions that matter?
- Which symptoms are new, severe, persistent or changing quickly?
- What is the single most useful outcome you want from this consultation?
- What would mean conventional medical review or emergency care should come first?

Contact Shande

For appointments and general enquiries, use WhatsApp or WeChat. Email is not presented as a routine customer-service channel.

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References & further reading

The chapters in this guide are drawn from the Shande Health Library. Key safety points are linked back to the public-health or professional sources cited in those articles.

• HealthHub: Balanced Diet

<https://www.healthhub.sg/well-being-and-lifestyle/food-diet-and-nutrition/healthy-balanced-diet-plan>

General health education | Not a diagnosis | Emergency in Singapore: 995