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# Herbs are good for health but should be taken cautiously

By MOHD HISHAM ABDUL RAFAR

KUALA LUMPUR: Herbs and food supplements have become multi-billion ringgit business worldwide as more people take to improving personal health and well-being.

In fact, it is ironical that countries manufacturing such products are not as well endowed with herbal plants as Malaysia with its renowned tropical rainforest.

Prof Dr Suhaila Mohamed from the Bioscience Institute of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said the goodness of local herbs had long been recognised in the past but it was not proven scientifically due to lack of equipment then.

Being a Senior Research Fellow of the UPM-MAKNA Cancer Research Laboratory she said the role of herbs should never be taken lightly as they could strengthen the body's immunity system and prevent diseases.

"Today we can choose to take either the herbs raw from the forest such as Tongkat Ali, Kacip Fatimah, Misai Kucing or in capsule forms using extracts of the herbs," she told Bernama here.

Nonetheless, she said the compounds of herbs may not be stable and as a result the effects of its goodness takes a long time, thus requiring the product to be mixed with chemicals which maybe harmful to consumers.

"We can use herbs purely 100 per cent but some unstable herbal compounds would take a long time to show its effects and as such a little bit of chemicals are added to expedite its effects," she said.

Suhaila said the concern and awareness of the community towards personal health currently, has opened up vast opportunities for local entrepreneurs to explore commercialization of herbs and its derivatives.

She said among types of herbs frequently used as food is pennywort, turmeric, ginger, cloves, cinnamon and caraway.

Turmeric has many benefits, including preventing diseases, detoxify and improve metabolism of the body while polyphenol from green tea can help reduce sugar in the blood.

One popular local herbal product manufacturing company in the country is Herba Penawar Al-Wahida (HPA), founded by Ismail Ahmad, a 100 per cent Bumiputra owned company that has been in the herbal industry for more than 20 years.

According to the HPA website, the objective of the company was to provide traditional herbs as an alternative to the community to enjoy better health.

Among HPA products are organic brown rice, Roselle jam, Roselle capsules, herbal tea and Noni.

In traditional Malay medicine, the usage of plants for treatment has long been in practice even though it has not gone through scientific laboratory tests to document its content or research to analyse its safety and effectiveness.

Now, there are several Bumiputra entrepreneurs generating traditional products with scientific studies which have been gaining popularity.

Among them is Noni juice which can be used to treat fever, pain, asthma, sinus, high blood pressure, gastric, diabetes and sore throat.

A traditional medicine practitioner, Rosli, 50 was confident that extract from local herbs could treat and prevent a number of diseases, including AIDS which has no cure in modern medicine.

Rosli who is from Kuang, Selangor is an Orang Asli dukun and is aware of the potential of traditional herbs.

"Even though herbs are generally good for health, consumers are advised not to mix modern with traditional medicine as it could result in negative side effects," he told Bernama here.

However, for modern medicine practitioner Dr Fuziah Ali, not all herbal medicine is good and suitable for human consumption.

As an example, Tongkat Ali she said if taken without proper control could hurt kidneys as the herb has two elements, one which heals and one which kills.

"To ensure the safety of herbal medicine, check for its registration with the Ministry of Health," she told Bernama. - Bernama