

Ashwagandha: From Ancient Tradition to Modern Research

by David Winston - March 6, 2017

Ayurveda or “the science of life” is the traditional medical system of both India and Nepal. This ancient body of knowledge, developed more than 3,000 years ago, is one of the most prominent practices of indigenous medicine today. It also influenced many of the world’s other great systems of medicine, including TCM (traditional Chinese medicine), Unani-tibb (Greco-arabic medicine), Tibetan medicine and Siddha (southern Indian and Sri Lankan medicine).

In Ayurveda, there are a number of greatly esteemed restorative medicines known as rasayanas. One of the most researched of these tonic herbs is the plant known as ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*). The root of this tender perennial (it is an annual in much of North America) is the primary part used, although the leaf has a long tradition of being used topically for infections, burns and insect bites.

The root acts as a calming adaptogen, nervine, antispasmodic, nutritive tonic, anti-inflammatory, immune amphoteric, anxiolytic, analgesic, thyroid stimulant and reproductive tonic for both men and women. As an adaptogen—herbs that help to re-regulate endocrine, nervous system and immune function, via the HPA axis, and Sympatho-adrenal system (SAS), while reducing stress hormones such as cortisol and preventing stress-induced mitochondrial dysfunction—*Withania* is somewhat unique. It is nourishing (rich in iron) so it is frequently used to treat anemia, fatigue and post-partum blood loss. The herb reduces anxiety and enhances healthy sleep, making it useful for excess insomnia (especially those with type A personality, who cannot “shut off” their mind at night) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). It also reduces muscle pain, inflammation and spasm, so it is highly appropriate for treating fibromyalgia (along with black cohosh and white peony) or restless leg syndrome.

In India, ashwagandha has the reputation of being a male sexual stimulant. In numerous human clinical trials, the herb has been shown to enhance erectile function, improve sperm count and motility, and stimulate libido. A recent study also showed that the root promoted sexual arousal in women. It has other benefits for women as well, including inhibiting osteoporosis, alleviating menopausal brain fog, headaches and muscle pain. This versatile herb also acts as an immune amphoteric. An immune amphoteric is an herb that helps to re-regulate the immune system, whether it is hyper-functioning (allergy), hypo-functioning (immune depletion such as cancer, HIV/AIDS or chronic Lyme disease) or both (most autoimmune disease). This ability is unique to a small number of herbs; they help the body to re-establish its normal self-regulatory function and regain immune competence. As an immune amphoteric, ashwagandha can be used as part of a protocol to treat autoimmune conditions, especially involving the musculoskeletal system (rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, polymyalgia rheumatic, relapsing polychondritis). It can also be quite effective for Hashimoto’s thyroiditis (an autoimmune disease causing hypothyroid function) but is contraindicated for hyperthyroid conditions such as Graves’ disease.

Withania can be taken in many forms. In India, the powdered root is often cooked in milk, with molasses added to make an iron-rich beverage. The powdered root is also frequently mixed with ghee (clarified butter) or honey. Personally, I prefer ashwagandha as a tincture (an alcohol and water extract), which is highly absorbable and easy to use. It is also available as a powdered herb in capsules, as a standardized extract in capsules or tablets, and the root can be decocted and made into a tea. All of these preparations have activity, so people can decide which dosage form is best by which they are most likely to take due to taste, ease of use or dietary restrictions.

*David Winston, RH(AHG), president and founder of [Herbalist & Alchemist](#), is a clinical herbalist, ethnobotanist, author and educator with more than 45 years of training in Chinese, Native American and eclectic/western herbal traditions. He lectures on the use of herbal medicine throughout the world and is the author of numerous books, including *Adaptogens; Herbs for Strength, Stamina and Stress Relief*.*