



ASTRAGALUS

Visit our internet store at: www.shaffervitamins.com We feature over 700 Brand Names Featuring over 14,000 Products! **SAVE at least 30%-40% on Every Order! NO COMPUTER - NO PROBLEM!** Call (484) 695-9496 if you need assistance or if you would like us to place the order for you! We are listed at <http://www.fairgroundfarmersmkt.com> listed under Merchants — Specialty Shops. Check out our in store monthly specials!

Keeping the Body Balanced



ROB McCaleb,
Contributing Writer

Astragalus is becoming a popular immune stimulant in the United States, as evidence of its effects on the immune system pours in. Research to date has shown that this remarkable plant stimulates the immune system in many ways. This modern research validates some ancient uses of the plant in China.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) considers astragalus or *huang qi* to be a tonic for the "spleen qi" and "lung qi." Qi or chi is considered to be the vital energy of the body, and most different types are described in terms of their "sphere of influence" or part of the body. However, the naming of qi for the body's organs does not strictly correlate with our concept of these organs.

When TCM says that astragalus "tonifies the spleen," it does not mean that the effect is on the physical organ that removes foreign bodies and damaged cells from the blood. Rather, it refers to a concept of health and the body's energy in balance.

The "spleen qi" is referred to as the "middle burner," where our bodies' energy builds. When our "life energy" is deficient, astragalus is thought to

increase or supplement it. More interesting is the fact that astragalus is said to "stabilize the exterior" of the body, which TCM interprets as protecting the body against disease. This equates to our concept of increasing resistance.

Albert Leung, Ph.D., is a Western-trained pharmacologist born in China with knowledge of both Chinese and Western medicine. In his book, *Chinese Herbal Remedies*, he said astragalus is popular in China for a number of illnesses and is used "in heavy dosage" for diabetes. Astragalus, he said, would most commonly be prescribed for a person "weak in qi." This opinion is echoed in various Chinese herb books and by several herbalists.

Astragalus is used to build up the yang qi in cases of deficiency, and is traditionally considered inappropriate for people with an excess of heat or dryness. Since the acute phase of illness is often characterized by fever and thirst, astragalus is rarely used during periods of sickness.

Rather, herbs which "release exterior conditions" are used. These include herbs which increase sweating (diaphoretics) like ma huang (*Ephedra sinica*) and cinnamon. After the acute illness is over, tonics like astragalus can be used to build the qi and "stabilize the exterior."

In other words, said herbalist Bill Brevoort, astragalus is used to build

up the resistance to disease but not while one is sick. He added that it is "the best herb in Chinese medicine" for strengthening resistance.

As with most herbs used in TCM, astragalus is used in combinations. For deep tonifying, it is combined with ginseng (*Panax ginseng*); for tonifying the blood, with dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*); and to tonify the lungs, with ginseng, rehmannia and schizandra.

Herbalist Peter Holmes added that practitioners of TCM in China often choose to supplement traditional knowledge with scientific information. So, although astragalus is supposedly contraindicated for acute illness, some Chinese doctors will add it to a formula anyway, based on results of scientific studies.

Increasingly, Chinese scientists are conducting Western-style research on TCM remedies. Acupuncturist and herbalist Michael Tierra said, "There is a tremendous influence of Western science on TCM, and I'm glad for it." He added that the way herbs are classified is not fixed or rigid, but can be altered with creative combinations.

Nonetheless, he agreed with the Chinese view that astragalus is contraindicated in cases of





inflammation or fever. He added that Western herbs can be incorporated with TCM concepts. For example, Western herbs like echinacea, goldenseal and plantain can be used as "clearing heat" herbs, or anything that increases perspiration. He cautioned, though, that over-stimulating the energy with "hot" herbs like cayenne and goldenseal could deplete the body's defenses during illness.

Scientific research has shown that astragalus is a powerful stimulant of the immune system. It increases the number and activity of immune cells throughout the body, stimulating them to heightened activity. This includes cells of the spleen that were shown to be more active in eliminating foreign particles (by phagocytosis) after 35 days of astragalus administration.

Another series of studies showed that astragalus extracts can restore the function of damaged immune system cells taken from cancer patients. These studies did not involve oral use of the extracts in humans, so it is unclear what implications this may have for cancer patients taking oral doses of astragalus.

However, one study indicated the extract was effective orally in mice, and the authors were quite impressed, remarking that "a complete immune restoration can be achieved by using a fractionated extract of *Astragalus membranaceus*..."

Most consumers probably use astragalus to prevent colds and other minor infectious disease. In one controlled experiment, astragalus reduced the incidence of common colds among users and shortened the

duration of colds by almost half.

Astragalus is earning a most impressive reputation in both the East and West. It is one of many examples in which modern scientific research is verifying the knowledge of TCM gleaned from millennia of experience. From the research to date, it appears that this remarkable tonic plant does indeed strengthen the spleen, lungs and "exterior" (resistance).

REFERENCES:

Chu, D., et al. *Clin. Immuno. and Immunopathology* 45, 1987, pp. 48-57.
Chu, D., et al. *J. Clin. Lab. Immunol.* 25, 1988, pp. 125-129.
Iwama, H., et al. *Planta Medica*, 1986, pp. 247-250.
Rou, Ma and Ren, Fu-Xie. *J. of Trad. Chinese Med.* 3(3), 1983, pp. 199-204. Sun, Y. *Cancer* 52(1), 1983, pp. 70-73.
Yunde, H. *Chinese Medical Journal*, 94(1), 1981, pp. 35-40.