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K-STATE Research and Extension
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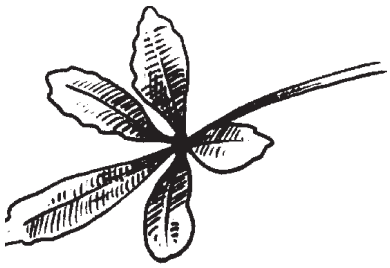
Herbs

Ginseng and Eleuthero

What are the folklore uses of ginseng?

Traditionally, ginseng has been used as a cure-all: an aphrodisiac, energy booster, and to increase intelligence and longevity. It also has been used to treat diabetes, colds and chest problems.

Eleuthero – often called by its common name, Siberian ginseng – is not a true ginseng variety. It was introduced into modern herbal medicine by Soviet scientists who were seeking a cheap, abundant substitute for ginseng. When eleuthero was first marketed in the United States, the name Siberian ginseng was used. It has been used to boost energy and athletic performance, and to treat conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and heart disease.



What is ginseng?

Ginseng is the dried root of plants grown in many parts of the world. The three major varieties are American, Oriental, and San qui ginseng. There are qualitative and quantitative differences among varieties, but their effects are similar.

The main active compounds in ginseng are believed to be ginsenosides. The chemical composition of the root varies according to its age, where it is grown, when harvested, and method of curing or drying. Some ginsenosides cause different reactions. For example, one raises blood pressure while another lowers it.

There are no ginsenosides in eleuthero; its active compounds are eleutherosides.

What are the proposed medicinal uses of ginseng?

The herb is reported to have a variety of beneficial effects on the cardiovascular, nervous and endocrine systems. It is often suggested for combating stress and fatigue. The Chinese use it to restore sexual energy.

How effective is ginseng?

There is no scientific evidence that ginseng is effective as an aphrodisiac or that it mimics the effects of estrogen. Most ginseng studies have been done with animals, but one well-controlled experiment on humans produced unclear results. Other studies with human subjects did not provide useful results because the type and amount of ginseng were not regulated.

While recent studies have provided more information about ginseng, there is inadequate understanding of the way the herb works. Many claims are debatable and unreliable.

There have been very few good human studies conducted using eleuthero. The only documented effect is that it is involved in immunity.

What are the side effects of ginseng?

Ginseng is not associated with serious side effects, but it may cause hypertension, nervousness, irritability, insomnia, diarrhea, skin lesions, or menopausal bleeding. It appears to be a low-risk herb, even with large doses.

No side effects of eleuthero consumption have been identified.

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What are the recommended forms and dosages of ginseng?

Obtaining quality ginseng can be difficult, and high quality root material is expensive. Ginseng is available in many forms: tea, capsule, extract, tablet, root, chewing gum, cigarettes, and candies. In these forms, it is difficult to determine quantity or quality of the product. In a study of 54 brands, 60 percent of the samples were shown to have no medicinal value, and 25 percent contained no ginseng.

A suggested daily dose is about one teaspoon of chopped, dried root steeped in a cup of boiling water to make tea, or a capsule containing 250 milligrams of the root. Ginseng may need to be taken up to a month before it is effective.

Conclusion

Ginseng has not been shown to be a useful therapeutic agent. Better human experiments are needed to identify beneficial or harmful physiological effects.

Although eleuthero is readily available as a capsule, existing evidence does not support its purported uses.

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