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HERBCLIP

FILE: · *Astragalus (Astragalus membranaceus)*

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RE: **Astragalus: Chinese Herbal Immune Stimulant**

Foster, S. *Astragalus: A Superior Herb. Herbs for Health*, September/October, 1998, pp. 40-41.

The root of astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*) has long been a mainstay of traditional Chinese medicine. Chinese herbals praise the plant, known as *huang-qi*, for its ability to fight fatigue and general debility. More recent research has demonstrated astragalus' ability to boost the immune system of chemotherapy patients, improve circulation, and protect the liver from toxic compounds. References are not included in this article.

Native to China, astragalus is found along forest margins in thin, open wooded areas, shrub thickets, and grasslands near the edges of forests. The Chinese harvest the roots of four- to five-year-old plants and slice them into long, diagonal strips reminiscent of tongue depressors. In traditional Chinese medicine astragalus is used to invigorate vital energy (*qi*) and strengthen resistance to disease. The traditional daily Chinese dose is 9 to 15 g of the dried sliced root, simmered in a quart of water for several hours until the water is reduced to one pint.

The *Astragalus* genus consists of over 1,750 species. Some species are used purely for ornamentation, some are used for medication, and some are poisonous. Woolly locoweed (*A. mollissimus*), found in New Mexico, acts as a neurotoxin, damaging or killing grazing animals, prairie dogs, and even bees. Other *Astragalus* species are routinely used in commercially prepared foods and cosmetics.

Chinese studies from the 1970s found that astragalus stimulates the immune system; improves the body's ability to fight bacteria, viruses, and inflammation; and protects the liver. Polysaccharides, saponins, and triterpenes may be responsible for its actions. Studying cancer patients receiving chemotherapy, researchers found that adding astragalus to their treatment regimen encourages the bone marrow (often destroyed by chemotherapy and radiation) to produce more white blood cells, and improves the ability of white blood cells to fight invading organisms. This is an important finding because immune-suppressed chemotherapy patients are often plagued by life-threatening opportunistic infections. The researchers also found that astragalus mitigated gastro-intestinal poisoning in patients

receiving conventional cancer therapies. These factors lead to an additional finding that chemotherapy patients treated with astragalus experienced a significant increase in survival rates. Other studies have shown that astragalus can reduce blood pressure, dilate blood vessels, and improve circulation.

Astragalus tinctures, tablets, and capsules are available. A typical capsule contains up to 500 mg of the root. A recommended dose of three grams might consist of two capsules, three times a day. Astragalus has no known adverse side effects. The article was written by Steven Foster, a highly respected botanical author and photographer of medicinal plants. —*Leela Devi, MSN, RN*

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