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Siberian ginseng

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Overview:

Siberian ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*), also known as eleuthero, has been used for centuries in Eastern countries, including China and Russia. Despite its name, it is completely different from American (*Panax quinquefolius*) and Asian ginseng (*Panax ginseng*), and has different active chemical components. The active ingredients in Siberian ginseng, called eleutherosides, are thought to stimulate the immune system.

Traditionally used to prevent colds and flu and to increase energy, longevity, and vitality, Siberian ginseng is widely used in Russia as an "adaptogen." An adaptogen is a substance that is supposed to help the body better cope with stress, either mental or physical.

Until recently, most scientific research on Siberian ginseng was done in Russia. Research on Siberian ginseng has included studies on the following:

Colds and flu

Some double-blind studies have found that a specific product containing Siberian ginseng and andrographis reduced the severity and length of colds, when taken with 72 hours of symptoms starting. Researchers don't know whether Siberian ginseng was responsible, or whether it was andrographis the combination of the two herbs.

One study found that people with flu who took the same product saw their symptoms go away faster than those who took the drug amantadine, which is used to treat some kinds of flu.

Another study found that healthy people who took Siberian ginseng for 4 weeks had more T-cells, which may indicate strengthening of their immune systems.

Herpes viral infection

One double-blind study of 93 people with herpes simplex virus type 2, which can cause genital herpes, found that taking Siberian ginseng reduced the number of outbreaks. Outbreaks that did happen were less severe and didn't last as long. Talk to your doctor about whether use Siberian ginseng as supplement to prevent herpes outbreaks is right for you.

Mental performance

Siberian ginseng is often used to maintain or restore mental alertness. But there haven't been enough scientific studies to know whether it really works. One preliminary study found that middle-aged volunteers who took Siberian ginseng improved their memory compared to those who took placebo.

Physical performance

Although Siberian ginseng is frequently suggested to improve physical stamina and increase muscle strength, studies have shown only mixed results.

Quality of life

One study found that elderly people who took Siberian ginseng improved mental health and social functioning after 4 weeks of therapy, compared to those who took placebo. But after 8 weeks, the benefits decreased.

Plant Description:

Siberian ginseng is a shrub native to the Far East that grows 3 - 10 feet high. Its leaves are attached to a main stem by long branches. Both the branches and the stem are covered with thorns. Flowers, yellow or violet, grow in umbrella-shaped clusters, and turn into round, black berries in late summer. The root itself is woody and is brownish, wrinkled, and twisted.

What's It Made Of?:

Siberian ginseng supplements are made from the root. The root contains a mixture of components called eleutherosides that are thought to offer health benefits. Among the other ingredients are chemicals called polysaccharides, which have been found to boost the immune system and lower blood sugar levels in animal tests.

Available Forms:

Siberian ginseng is available as liquid extracts, solid extracts, powders, capsules, and tablets, and as dried or cut root for tea.

The quality of many herbal supplements, including Siberian ginseng, can vary widely. Tests of commercial products claiming to have Siberian ginseng found that as many as 25% had no measurable amount of the herb at all. Plus, many were contaminated with contents not marked on the label. Purchase Siberian ginseng and all herbal products from reputable manufacturers. Ask your pharmacist.

How to Take It:

Pediatric

Siberian ginseng is not recommended for use in children.

Adult

Siberian ginseng comes in many forms and is often combined with other herbs and supplements in formulas for such things as fatigue and alertness. To find the right dose for you, talk to an experienced health care practitioner.

For chronic conditions, such as fatigue or stress, Siberian ginseng can be taken for 3 months, followed by 3 - 4 weeks off. If you want to take Siberian ginseng again, you should be under the supervision of your doctor.

Precautions:

The use of herbs is a time-honored approach to strengthening the body and treating disease. Herbs, however, contain components that can trigger side effects and interact with other herbs, supplements, or medications. For these reasons, herbs should be taken with care, under the supervision of a health care provider qualified in the field of botanical medicine.

Siberian ginseng is generally considered safe when used as directed. However, people with high blood pressure, obstructive sleep apnea, narcolepsy, heart disease, mental illness such as mania or schizophrenia, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and people with autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis or Crohn's disease should not take Siberian ginseng.

Women who have a history of estrogen-sensitive cancers or uterine fibroids should ask their doctor before taking Siberian ginseng because it may act like estrogen in the body.

Some side effects may include:

- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Drowsiness
- Vomiting
- Headache
- Confusion
- Irregular heart rhythm
- Nosebleed

Possible Interactions:

If you are being treated with any of the following medications, you should not use Siberian ginseng without first talking to your health care provider:

Anticoagulants (blood thinners) -- Siberian ginseng may increase the risk of bleeding, especially if you already take blood-thinners such as aspirin, warfarin (Coumadin), or clopidogrel (Plavix).

Corticosteroids (such as prednisone) -- Siberian ginseng may interact with steroids.

Digoxin -- Siberian ginseng may raise blood levels of digoxin, a medication used to treat heart conditions. This can increase the risk of side effects.

Diabetes medications -- Siberian ginseng may lower blood sugar levels, raising the risk of hypoglycemia or low blood sugar.

Lithium -- Theoretically, Siberian ginseng could make it harder for the body to get rid of lithium, meaning dangerously high levels could build up.

Other medications -- Siberian ginseng may interact with medications that are processed by the liver. If you take any medications, ask your doctor before taking Siberian ginseng.

Drugs that suppress the immune system -- Siberian ginseng may boost the immune system and may interact with drugs taken to treat an autoimmune disease or drugs taken after organ transplant.

Sedatives -- Siberian ginseng may increase the effects of sedatives, primarily barbiturates (medications, including pentobarbital, that are used to treat insomnia or seizures).

Alternative Names:

Acanthopanax senticosus; Eleuthero; Eleutherococcus senticosus; Ginseng - Siberian

- Reviewed last on: 1/27/2011
- Steven D. Ehrlich, NMD, Solutions Acupuncture, a private practice specializing in complementary and alternative medicine, Phoenix, AZ. Review provided by VeriMed Healthcare Network.

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