



HERBAL MEDICINE

An Effective Herb for Stress

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We all know stress has become a significant factor in the increasing number of reported mental health disabilities and a contributor to various physical health conditions, such as ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and so on. Increasing research, including an intriguing study¹ published in the Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine a few years ago, supports supplementation with the adaptogen herb ashwagandha to reduce feelings of stress, improve feelings of well-being and lower key objective blood markers of the stress response in highly stressed individuals.

Ashwagandha is recognized as an adaptogen herb. Adaptogen herbs have been shown to improve an individual's ability to cope with stress by normalizing the physiological process of the body and helping the body adapt to changes.

Consequences of Stress

Stress is a condition arising from external physical or mental overload. It can make us feel embattled, nervous, anxious or otherwise less capable of full and normal response to the demands of life. Studies show prolonged exposure to stress can unbalance the mental and physiological state of a person, thereby leading to other illnesses like depression, high blood pressure, heart disease and metabolic disorders, including diabetes.

Such conditions, rooted in mental or emotional factors, are rapidly increasing in prevalence and emerging as major global diseases. It is not surprising, therefore, that an increasing fraction of the population is seeking help to overcome stress.



Serum cortisol is a direct reflection of how the body is responding to stress. As perceived stress increases, so does the release of cortisol from the adrenal glands. Studies have shown that chronic high levels of cortisol can produce adverse health effects including:

- Weakening of the immune system with increased risk of infections and cancer (and possibly autoimmune diseases)
- Promotion of ulcer development
- Increased risk of high blood sugar (cortisol-stimulated glycogenolysis in liver)
- Increased inflammation

Study Details

This randomized, controlled study enrolled 64 subjects with a history of chronic stress after performing relevant clinical examinations and laboratory tests including a measurement of serum cortisol, and assessment of scores on standard stress-assessment questionnaires. One group was given a supplement containing 300 mg ashwagandha root extract, standardized to 5 percent withanolide content; the other group received a placebo.

This study assessed the level of stress, depression, anxiety and general well-being of an individual using three different, extensively used sets of stress scales and serum cortisol level, a biochemical marker of stress. Results showed that after 60 days, compared to the placebo group, subjects taking the ashwagandha supplement experienced marked improvement in:

- Feelings of anxiety
- Insomnia

- Depression
- Social dysfunction

Remarkably, researchers also saw a marked reduction in blood cortisol levels. After just 60 days of treatment, a cortisol reduction of 28 percent was observed in the ashwagandha group, compared to an 8 percent reduction in the placebo/control group.

The researchers concluded, "The findings suggest that high-concentration full-spectrum Ashwagandha root extract improves an individual's resistance towards stress and thereby improves self-assessed quality of life. High-concentration full-spectrum Ashwagandha root extract can be used safely as an adaptogen in adults who are under stress."

Clinical Application

I have recommended adaptogen herbs to help lower cortisol in highly stressed patients and have been impressed with the results. I personally like the combination of the herbs ashwagandha, rodiola and schisandra.

This combination is not a total solution to combating stress by any means. Certainly, aerobic exercise, meditation, yoga, progressive relaxation, psychotherapy, stress management, etc., are also important. But adaptogen herbs, such as ashwagandha, should be considered as part of the global management in these cases. The mere fact that it can reduce cortisol blood levels is quite impressive and significant from a total health standpoint.

Reference

- Chandrasekhar K, Kapoor J, Anishetty S. A prospective, randomized double-blind, placebo-controlled study of safety and efficacy of a high-concentration full-spectrum extract of ashwagandha root in reducing stress and anxiety in adults. *Indian J Psychological Med*, 2012 July-Sept;34(3):255-262.

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