Ashwagandha: “Indian Ginseng” to Counter Stress

Also known as winter cherry and Indian ginseng, ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) is a highly prized herb in Ayurvedic medicine, dating back more than 3,000 years. Its Sanskrit name means “like a horse,” an apt description of its pungent aroma.

**What It Might Do:** Ashwagandha is referred to as an adaptogen or tonic, an herb that enhances resistance to stress, increases stamina and promotes general well-being—similar to ginseng, but with additional calming effects. Ashwagandha has been shown to inhibit inflammation, stimulate immune cells, improve memory and protect the heart. A review of the literature in the December 2000 issue of *Alternative Medicine Review* also suggests anti-tumor, antistress, antioxidant and rejuvenative properties, along with nervous system and hormonal effects. However, almost all the research has been in animals. Studies in humans are conspicuously scant; one of the few found significant pain reduction and improved functioning in 42 people with osteoarthritis after three months of use.

**How it Might Work:** Ashwagandha contains over 35 identified constituents, which may help explain the plant’s myriad medicinal actions. In addition to alkaloids and saponins, steroidal compounds called withanolides that resemble the active constituents in ginseng may normalize hormone levels.

**If You Take:** Recommended dosages vary. Some say to take capsules of powdered root (two to three grams, three times a day); check package directions on extracts. For standardized products, look for 1.5% withanolides and 1% total alkaloids.

**Caution:** Do not take if you are pregnant or nursing, have ulcers or gastritis or take sedatives or benzodiazepines. Large doses of the herb may cause narcotic-like effects and stomach upset.

**EN Weighs In:** For countering the effects of stress, ashwagandha may be cheaper and more responsible than environmentally threatened ginseng, though its effectiveness and safety have yet to be clinically proved.