getting to the root of ginseng

Revered for centuries, can the cure-all herb stand up to the tests of our times?

By Rachelle Kanigel

The healers of ancient China were guided by a simple but elegant principle: In the color and shape of a natural object lie the clues to its curative powers. Having trouble keeping the wife satisfied? Try a potion of crushed rhinoceros horn. Feeling a bit weak? Fortify the life fluid with reddish herbs like salvia and safflower. Seeking vitality, virility, and long life? Brew a drink of ginseng root, its main stalk like a man’s torso sporting limblike, sexually suggestive appendages. (Ginseng hunters reportedly saved the specimens that most resembled the human form for emperors, as these roots were thought to be the most potent of all.)

While few people put much stock in the native appearance of their medicines anymore, the ginseng mystique is still alive and well. The plant the Chinese call the “spirit of the earth” is one of the hottest-selling herbal remedies in the United States, racking up more than $64 million in annual sales in 1999. Stressed-out executives, students, athletes, and elderly people alike look to ginseng for a physical pick-me-up or mental buzz or as a digestible bulwark against disease. And they’re not just downing it with water. These days, you can sip the herb in your smoothie, munch it in your breakfast cereal, or swill it in your beer.

But can this gnarly root really boost energy, add zip to a sagging sex life, strengthen the immune system, improve athletic performance, normalize blood pressure and blood sugar, stimulate the brain, and prevent cancer, as its promoters would have you believe? Not to pour cold water on those ginseng-laced chips you just bought, but don’t count on it. As is the case with many products that boast of such wide-ranging powers, the clinical evidence for ginseng’s reputation is sketchy, and scientists have yet to confirm any of the claims definitively. “There have been a lot of studies, but it’s very difficult to nail down what ginseng’s actually good for,” says Ara DerMarderosian, scientific director of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Institute at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia.

Indeed, scientists all over the world have been analyzing ginseng for more than 50 years, observing its behavior in test tubes, lab animals, and humans. As they’ve deconstructed the plant, researchers have isolated more than 30 individual chemicals, called ginsenosides. Among other things, ginsenosides appear both to stimulate and suppress the central nervous system, strengthen the immune system, and improve circulation. But because the plant also contains vitamins, minerals, and an array of other active ingredients, it’s hard to be certain of just what’s doing what, alone or in concert.

That’s critical, since ginseng has
READ THIS INFORMATION COMPLETELY BEFORE USING SARAFEM (Sar-fem). This leaflet provides a summary about SARAFEM and does not contain complete information about your medicine. This information is not meant to take the place of discussions between you and your doctor. Talk with your doctor, pharmacist or other healthcare professional if there is something you do not understand or if you want to learn more about SARAFEM. Always follow your doctor’s instructions on how to take SARAFEM.

What is SARAFEM?
SARAFEM is a prescription medicine used by women who have menstrual periods or cycles to treat the symptoms of premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD).

What is PMDD?
Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) is a medical condition that affects only women who have menstrual periods or cycles. Symptoms of PMDD are limited to the week or two before a woman’s menstrual period and commonly include mood symptoms such as irritability, mood swings, and tension as well as physical symptoms of bloating and breast tenderness. When the symptoms of PMDD appear, they cause interference in daily activities and relationships.

What is the active ingredient in SARAFEM?
SARAFEM contains fluoxetine hydrochloride, the same active ingredient found in Prozac.

How does SARAFEM work?
While it is unknown what causes PMDD, many doctors believe it may be related to an imbalance in a natural chemical in the body called serotonin. The actions of SARAFEM on serotonin may explain its effects in improving the symptoms of this condition.

Who should not take SARAFEM?
You should not take SARAFEM if you:
• Are allergic to fluoxetine hydrochloride, the active ingredient in SARAFEM.
• Are taking a type of antidepressant medicine known as a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI), such as Nardil (phenelzine) or Eldepryl (tranylcypromine). Using an MAOI together with many prescription medicines including SARAFEM can cause serious or even life-threatening reactions. You must wait at least 14 days after you have stopped taking an MAOI before you can take SARAFEM. Also, you need to wait at least 5 weeks after you stop taking SARAFEM before you can take an MAOI.
• Are taking a type of antipsychotic medicine known as Melani (thioridazine). You need to wait at least 5 weeks after you stop taking SARAFEM before you take Melani.

How should I take SARAFEM?
• Take SARAFEM exactly as directed by your doctor.
• SARAFEM comes as a 10 mg tablet and a 20 mg caplet. The usual dose is 20 mg a day, but your doctor will prescribe the dose that is right for you.
• If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. However, it is too late if you take it within 6 hours of the missed dose. Take only your regularly scheduled dose. Do not take more than the daily amount of SARAFEM that has been prescribed for you.
• SARAFEM can be taken with or without food.
• To help you remember to take SARAFEM, it may be best to take it at about the same time each day, such as every morning.
• Remember to get your refill before you run out of SARAFEM.
• Tell your doctor about any long-term or regular use of any over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, natural supplements, herbal remedies, or alcohol. As with most other prescription medications, SARAFEM may interact with some of these products. Tell your doctor if you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant or are breast feeding while taking SARAFEM.
• Tell your doctor if you have diabetes. The dose of diabetes medicine you need may change when you start or stop taking SARAFEM.
• Tell your doctor about any other medical conditions you may have, especially liver disease, or a history of seizures or migraine.

What are possible side effects of SARAFEM?
All prescription medicines may cause side effects in some patients.
• In medical studies of women taking SARAFEM for PMDD, the most common side effects likely caused by SARAFEM were tiredness, upset stomach, nervousness, dizziness, and difficulty concentrating. Other side effects were reported less frequently in those same studies. Side effects were mild or mild to moderate, and disappeared after a few weeks, and most side effects didn’t cause women to stop taking SARAFEM.
• SARAFEM can cause changes in sexual desire or satisfaction.
• Do not drive a car or operate hazardous machinery until you know what effect SARAFEM may have on you.
• Contact your doctor or healthcare professional if you feel sad, have trouble relaxing, or if you feel other side effects that concern you while taking SARAFEM.

What else can I do?
In addition to taking SARAFEM:
• Eat a well-balanced diet (including fruits, vegetables, and water) and get regular exercise.
• Drink plenty of water daily and the amount of caffeine and salt in your diet, especially before your menstrual period.
• Talk to your doctor before you begin any diet or exercise program.

How do I store SARAFEM?
• Store SARAFEM at room temperature.
• Keep SARAFEM out of the reach of children.

General Information
This is a summary of the information about SARAFEM. Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than those listed in a patient information summary. This medicine was prescribed for you only. Do not give it to anyone else or use your SARAFEM.

If you have any questions or concerns, want to report any problems with the use of SARAFEM or want more information about SARAFEM, contact your doctor, pharmacist, or other healthcare professional. This patient information summary has been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration.

www.sarafem.com

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A Chinese doctor in the first century reported using ginseng to treat the hallmark symptoms of diabetes. Recently, studies have shown that the herb does in fact stimulate the release of insulin.

deficiency, for declining capacity for work and concentration, and also during convalescence.” In a Mexican study of 500 older adults, those who regularly took ginseng in combination with a multivitamin reported an improvement in the quality of their lives, as measured by 11 different factors. The men and women who took only a multivitamin didn’t feel any better. Another controlled study showed that ginseng boosted the immune response of subjects plagued by chronic bronchitis.

No workout wonder
Despite giving a lift to the ailing, ginseng has not convincingly shown that it improves physical stamina in healthy folks. According to a review conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, most of the clinical studies assessing ginseng and physical performance have been small, poorly conducted, and lacking in proper controls. In the few well-run studies, ginseng failed to produce any significant differences in energy metabolism or endurance.

In one respected trial, exercise researchers at Wayne State University gave 36 healthy men ginseng or a placebo for eight
Is it true that some supplements contain raw animal parts?
Isn't that dangerous?
You’re probably referring to recent news reports stemming from a letter to the New England Journal of Medicine. Scott Norton, a dermatologist in Chevy Chase, Maryland, noted that the list of ingredients in a nationally distributed supplement includes cow brain; spleen; liver; pituitary; pineal, and adrenal glands; placenta; prostate; intestine; thyroid; and other bovine organs.

In his letter, Norton noted that while the government has blocked the importation of meat and organs from countries where bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) has been found, the ban is only on tissues used in food and medical products and devices. The law ties the Food and Drug Administration’s hands when it comes to over-the-counter dietary supplements. But that’s a moot point if you buy products manufactured in the United States. The importation ban ensures that supplements made in this country are free of potentially dangerous animal parts.

Nonetheless, I personally would not use supplements containing glandular or other tissue from animals. The fact that these potentially hazardous tissues can be found in some supplements illustrates the importance of carefully reading labels.

I’ve heard that there’s a flu vaccine shortage this year. What else can I do to stay healthy this winter?
Unless the flu virus of the year is especially virulent—and this year’s crop doesn’t seem to be—I don’t think shots are necessary for all healthy adults. I do agree with the new government health recommendations that people over 50, health-care workers, and those with weakened immune systems should get a flu shot.

Antiviral medications such as Amantadine and Rimantadine are good for preventing and controlling outbreaks of type A flu in settings such as nursing homes. However, neither is recommended for prevention in healthy people because they can cause dizziness, light-headedness, fainting, or confusion, particularly when combined with alcohol. If you take either of these drugs, be sure you know how you react to them before you drive or do anything that could be dangerous should you get dizzy.

To reduce your flu risk, remember that the virus spreads via airborne droplets from sneezes and coughs. Wash your hands frequently and keep them away from your eyes and nose. Try to avoid contact with people who have colds or the flu. And take daily doses of vitamin C, garlic, echinacea, and astragalus to boost your immunity.

If you get the flu anyway, ask your doctor for a prescription for one of the newer antivirals, zanamivir (Relenza) or oseltamivir (Tamiflu). These can reduce the severity and shorten the duration of the flu (though they won’t prevent infection).

Also, do your friends and colleagues a favor and stay home in bed—making a martyr of yourself by going to work won’t do you any good and will expose others to the virus. Drink plenty of non-dairy fluids, take vitamin C and the herbs mentioned above, and use sage or eucalyptus steam inhalations.

Andrew Weil, M.D., is director of the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona. For more of his advice on health and healing, visit Ask Dr. Weil (www.drweil.com). E-mail questions for this column to DrWeil@health.com.
Stretch Yourself Slim

Yes, yoga’s a great stress reliever. But as the moves improve your strength and aerobic fitness, they can also help you shed pounds. In the video Yoga Conditioning for Weight Loss ($15), renowned yogi Suzanne Deason guides you through poses for all levels of fitness and flexibility. To order, call 800/254-8464 or visit www.gaiam.com.

Needle and the Damage Undone

Researchers at Yale Medical School have found that patients who received acupuncture along with counseling were more likely to kick their cocaine habit than those who got only counseling.

FOLLOW THE LIGHT TO CLEARER SKIN

For a teenager, acne is a painful rite of passage; for an adult, it’s unacceptable. Here’s a potential drug-free solution: light therapy, minus the damaging UV rays. In a recent study, British researchers sat 27 patients in front of specially designed lamps for 15 minutes a day for 12 weeks. The number of visible facial blemishes dropped by 76 percent.

COMFORT FOR COLDS

Tom’s of Maine, the folks who gave us naturally sweetened toothpaste in funky flavors, has released a line of cold-care products. Their Natural Cough and Cold Rub mixes lemon verbena with eucalyptus for an invigorating twist. And the ginger and green tea in their Natural Echinacea Tonic help the medicine go down. For more details, visit www.tomsofmaine.com.

ALL ABOUT GINSENG

Popping the herb just yet. “Some people may already be taking it and doing well,” says Vuksan, “but it’s too early to recommend it to everyone. There are still too many questions that need to be answered.” Researchers haven’t figured out which of ginseng’s components might be responsible for lowering blood sugar. Nor are they certain which form of the herb is most effective, how it interacts with other drugs, or how much a diabetic should take. And though ginseng appears safe at low doses for short periods of time, it could have adverse effects with long-term use, particularly in someone with a condition as serious as diabetes.

LOOK BEFORE YOU SWALLOW

People who want to give ginseng a try would do well to heed the classic advice of the marketplace: caveat emptor. True ginseng is expensive stuff, and a slew of imitators have appeared on the scene. Experts recommend sticking to the two Panax varieties.

Even consumers who look for Panax on the label may not get what they paid for. In a recent survey, ConsumerLab.com, an independent laboratory that screens health products, found that only 9 of the 22 ginseng products tested passed muster. Several brands were contaminated with pesticides, and others had lower-than-promised concentrations of ginsenosides.

All ginseng takers would do well to proceed with caution. In large amounts, the herb can cause troubles such as headaches, insomnia, diarrhea, agitation, and a rise in blood pressure. Experts recommend a dose of 500 to 2,000 milligrams a day of dried root for healthy people (400 to 800 mg for the elderly), or 200 mg a day of a standardized extract.

What’s the safest—and tastiest—way to get your dose? DerMarderosian advises doing what the Chinese emperors did: Drink it in a tea. Fresh and dried ginseng root are available at Asian markets and many health food stores. Slice or grate it, boil it in water, and add a little sugar or honey. It may not send you running to the gym or cure all that ails you, but it could provide a lift. And while you sip, picture yourself on a dais surrounded by courtiers. Now, don’t you feel better?