Ginkgo, Head to Toe
Forget memory—what about the other benefits this herb may offer?

What’s the best-selling herbal remedy on the U.S. market? The answer, ginkgo biloba, comes quickly to mind—which is, after all, the point. More than 10 million absentminded Americans pop this supplement to help their brains function more like the iMac they covet than the sputtering Kaypro they’ve become. Chances are you’re one of the faithful—or are thinking about joining the club.

Well, there’s good news and bad news. If your only goal is to jog a normally aging memory, don’t bother, researchers say. While ginkgo does hold promise for seriously forgetful seniors, there’s no evidence that it will nudge the average stress-addled 40-year-old to tuck the shopping list in her purse before heading to the store. The good news? Scientists are discovering that ginkgo has a few pleasant surprises hidden in its elegant leaves. Anyone whose idea of a good time is making love, hiking in the mountains, or going for a stroll might want to pay attention.

Ginkgo seems to do its work via the circulatory system. The leaves of this ancient tree are chock-full of compounds that work independently and in concert, scientists believe, to influence how blood flows. “Ginkgo makes the blood more slippery,” says Varro E. Tyler, author of Tyler’s Herbs of Choice: The Therapeutic Use of Phytomedicinals. “It prevents platelets from clumping, thereby allowing the blood to flow more freely.” It also has an antioxidant effect, strengthening the capillaries, the tiny vessels that bring blood to tissues and organs, including the brain.

This probably explains why ginkgo can be effective in older brains. Poor circulation contributes to “cerebral insufficiency,” seen mostly in the elderly. According to Commission E, the German agency that is one of the world’s authorities on herbal remedies, ginkgo can relieve the symptoms—foggy memory, confusion, dizziness, fatigue,

Prevention, Too?
Researchers are studying whether ginkgo can ward off, not just treat, dementia. Subjects must be 75 or older and in good health. If you know someone who might want to participate, call 412/624-6889.
depression, ringing in the ears, and headache—in two to three months.

Research suggests the supplement may also be useful in treating mild to moderate cases of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. In one study, patients who took 120 milligrams daily for a year saw their symptoms stabilize or slightly improve. Those who swallowed a placebo continued to decline. An analysis of more than 50 studies found that ginkgo seemed to have a “small but significant” effect on the ability of Alzheimer's patients to think, reason, and remember. Exactly why isn't known, but researchers are betting on ginkgo's antioxidant and blood-thinning properties.

So if it might help your senile grandmother, why won’t it jog your middle-aged memory to keep better track of bills? One reason: The fuzzy recall that hits at midlife more likely stems from busyness, sleeplessness, or stress, not insufficient blood flow. No reputable studies have shown that ginkgo benefits the normally aging brain. “If the average person takes it and feels better,” Tyler says, “it’s probably due to a placebo effect.”

So, what does have scientists excited? Some tantalizing clues about ginkgo’s effects south of the brain. Preliminary research in three areas is especially notable:

A Lagging Libido
If antidepressants have sapped your interest in sex, ginkgo might help rekindle the spark. In one placebo-controlled study, a California psychiatrist gave the herb to 63 men and women who were suffering from sexual side effects often associated with such medications: decreased desire, erection problems, and difficulties reaching orgasm. After four weeks, 91 percent of the women and 76 percent of the men reported some improvement.

Two other studies tested a compound called A-ginMax, which contains ginkgo, L-arginine (an amino acid), ginseng, and vitamins. Nearly 85 percent of the male subjects said the pill improved their ability to maintain erections, and 80 percent claimed greater satisfaction with their sex lives. Of the women, 71 percent grew more interested in sex, 53 percent felt increased sensitivity to stimulation, and 65 percent achieved orgasm more frequently. The ginkgo in the compound

Finned Friends Whet Appetites
People with Alzheimer's disease often waste away, in large part because they have difficulty focusing long enough to eat. A recent study hints at a simple solution. Doctors found that patients who took their meals while watching fish swim in a tank consumed up to 21 percent more food than when they dined without visual aids.

Integrating Medicine on the Web
What makes www.wholehealthmd.com one of the most comprehensive Internet sites on health? It's the mix of holistic and mainstream medical advice on more than 100 conditions. M.D.s and alternative practitioners answer your questions and help you decide when to treat yourself and when to call a doctor. You can even click on the Whole Foods link and have organic goodies delivered to your door.

A Handy Guide for Massaging Feet
Practice the healing art of reflexology with these silky socks by Basic Knead ($25). Follow the clear map of reflex points and their corresponding body parts and in theory you'll rub out all manner of aches and pains. Order at 800/330-2109.

Soup for the Soul, Minus the Chicken
Low on confidence? Feeling stuck? Transformation Soup (Simon & Schuster, $16), the latest handwritten tome from best-selling author and artist SARK, preaches that embracing your imperfections is the quickest way to recover when life throws you a curve. Her trademark style is witty and inspiring.—PAULA MOTTE
is believed to help increase blood flow to the genitals, says Mary Lake Polan, chair of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Stanford University Medical Center and a consultant to the pill’s manufacturer.

Altitude Sickness
Ginkgo also may help fight off the head-pounding dizziness, breathlessness, nausea, and achy hands and feet that can overtake you when a hike in the mountains deprives your body of its usual dose of oxygen. French researchers tested the supplement on 44 men trekking in the Himalayas. All were susceptible to altitude sickness. Yet none of the ginkgo takers suffered circulation-related symptoms such as lightheadedness or soreness, compared to 40 percent of those who popped a placebo; and only 14 percent experienced respiratory symptoms, versus 81 percent of the placebo group.

Leg Cramps
Even if your plans don’t include climbing Mt. Everest, ginkgo can help you stay active. Several studies have found that it relieves pains in the lower legs caused by narrowing of the arteries.

If You Try Ginkgo
Ginkgo is generally safe for regular use. Side effects may include headaches, upset stomach, and rash. Commission E recommends 120 mg a day for most conditions, including ringing in the ears and vertigo unaccompanied by poor recall; Tyler says people with seriously blurred memories can take 240 mg a day, split into two doses. But be careful not to mix it with other blood-thinning medications or supplements, such as aspirin or warfarin (Coumadin), garlic pills, vitamin E, or blood pressure drugs.

Also be wary of what you buy. Supplements are not regulated, and labels may promise more than a capsule delivers. In the case of ginkgo, avoid the cheaper pills, Tyler urges. Ginkgo is an expensive herb, and if you’re buying 40 tablets for $1, you’re not getting a quality product. Reliable brands include Ginkgo-2000, Ginkgold, Quantera, and BioGinkgo.

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