At this time of year many people come into the clinic looking for both an energy- and immune-boosting tonic. One of the best botanicals for this purpose comes to us from China. No, not the expensive and widely-known ginseng, but a more humble, economical herb from the pea family—astragalus.

The Chinese (Mandarin) name for astragalus is 黄芪. First written about in China over 5,000 years ago, it was considered one of the most important tonic herbs, thus the name "yellow leader." Another common name for this herb is "sweet root" because of its very sweet, delicious taste.

Current Western applications of astragalus are primarily for restoring and strengthening the immune response, enhancing cardiovascular function, and increasing vitality. Western preparations include dried root for decoction (boiled tea), liquid extract, tablets, and powdered root.

Standing on guard
As an immune tonic, astragalus (Astragalus membranaceus) is considered an adaptogen (see sidebar), providing deeper immune-system support than echinacea.

There have been many clinical studies showing how astragalus not only boosts the immune system, but also encourages an increase in immune cell (T-cells, natural killer cells, macrophages, immunoglobulin) activity, production, and function.

Astragalus appears to help trigger immune cells from a resting state into heightened activity. The number of macrophages (cells of the immune system that ingest foreign antigens to protect against infection) has been shown to increase after administering a decoction of astragalus. The natural killer cells of the immune system also have a markedly enhanced ability to fight intruders (five- to sixfold).

Matters of the heart
As a cardiotonic (an agent that has a tonic effect on the heart), astragalus increases the heart’s contractions. Several studies also show that astragalus offers heart-protecting effects, including protection against free-radical oxidative damage.

One study in China of 92 patients who had insufficient blood supply to their heart muscle had significant relief from angina, and the effective rate of electrocardiogram improvement was 82.6 percent after being treated with astragalus.

In another Chinese study of 20 patients with angina, cardiac output (the volume of blood being pumped by the heart, in particular a ventricle) was significantly increased after they were given astragalus for two weeks.
In addition to these heart-helping benefits, astragalus has also been shown to be hypotensive, lowering blood pressure by relaxing the blood vessels.

Get up and go

Traditionally, the Chinese considered astragalus a superior qi (energy) tonic that enhanced energy, especially for those recovering from an illness or for those exhausted by fatigue.

In Chinese traditional medicine, astragalus is used to strengthen the spleen and augment qi, and is appropriate for cases where there is lack of appetite, fatigue, diarrhea, prolapsed rectum, and abdominal bleeding. It is used to strengthen the lungs and is therefore used to treat frequent colds or shortness of breath. It is also recommended to strengthen qi and blood for postpartum fever and blood deficiency.

The dosage of this herb is quite liberal, with 9 g to 30 g being consumed over the day. This can be as a boiled tea or a delicious liquid extract (tincture). In extensive tests, no toxicity has been found in this herb, even when taken in large quantities.

Astragalus is a general tonic useful for many functions, especially building the immune system when in a fatigued state. We recommend it often in the clinic, with a very favourable compliance due to its delicious taste. You can find this humble herb in your local health food store.

What is an adaptogen?

The word adaptogen, coined by Russian scientist Dr. Nikolai Lazarev, refers to a natural herb product that increases the body’s resistance to stresses such as trauma, anxiety, and bodily fatigue. The criteria Dr. Lazarev established for an herb to be considered an adaptogen are:

- It must cause only minimal disorders in the body’s physiological functions.
- It must increase the body's resistance to adverse influences not by a specific action but by a wide range of physical, chemical, and biochemical factors.
- It must have an overall normalizing effect, improving all kinds of conditions and aggravating none.


Oats release energy very slowly and so give you sustained energy and help you feel fuller for longer. nairn's oatcakes and oat biscuits are full of the goodness of oats with no artificial additives or hydrogenated fat.

nairn's, nice 'n natural

TFB & Associates, Markham, Ont. Tel:(905)940-0889 customer.service@tfb.ca

Terry Willard, CIH, PhD, is a practitioner, teacher, director of the Wild Rose College of Natural Healing in Calgary, Alberta, and author of Mind-Body Harmony (Key Porter, 2003).