



Ashwagandha (*Withania Somnifera*)

By: Gary E. Foresman, MD

11/10/2008

Clinical Pearls: Useful for underactive thyroid, adapting to stress, as a general tonic, integrative oncology, diabetes, fighting pain and inflammation, improving cognitive function, and improving libido.

The herbal supplement ashwagandha has become commonly known as Indian ginseng. Although not truly related to the ginseng family, this herb's many tonic properties proffer it the respect among traditional Ayurvedic medicine that the ginseng family does in traditional Chinese medicine. It is the root of this plant and its strong smell that gives rise to its name in Sanskrit ashva (horse) and gandha (smell). The root also contains the powerful withanolides which provide the significant adaptogenic properties which, legend would tell you, confers the recipient the strength and potency of a horse!

Legend aside, hundreds of articles abound in the literature about the healing properties of ashwagandha, but unfortunately few clinical trials exist that reach the standard for a Western medicine practitioner. I will discuss my anecdotal experience with this herb and what research indicates the future of this herb might be.

Indeed it was my search for a thyroid tonic that has revitalized my interest in this herb. So often I find my patients taking supplements for "underactive thyroid" that have absolutely no utility, and as a Western doctor, I can show them laboratory tests which document how their kelp, glandular, and homeopathic remedies are doing nothing at all. What I have found in ashwagandha is an herb that does improve thyroid hormone synthesis and/or release. Indeed anecdotal case reports exist of this herb causing excess thyroid function (that was completely reversible on cessation of the herb). I have just begun to use ashwagandha for this indication but preliminary results are gratifying. It is nice to be able to offer something to my patients for early hypothyroidism which improves their own endogenous thyroid hormone production, instead of going straight to prescribing thyroid hormones. Not just trying a natural remedy first, but one that really can work.

The legendary role of ashwagandha in helping with general adaptation to stress and as an adrenal adaptogen is supported by multiple animal studies. Clinical studies indicate that ashwagandha decreases excess cortisol response to stress and by binding to GABA receptors in the brain exerting its anti-anxiety effects. Despite its role as a general tonic, people will note more of a calming effect with ashwagandha than provoking bursts of energy.

Ashwagandha's role in integrative oncology has yet to be determined, but preliminary trials support its use in supporting people through chemotherapy and radiation therapy, especially by boosting white cell counts and prevention of anemia. No negative effect on the efficacy of these therapies occurs. In addition to protecting the body during Western treatments, ashwagandha has a direct cytotoxic (tumor cell killing) effect on many types of tumors.

The traditional uses of ashwagandha in the treatment of multiple conditions are supported by research in animal models for the following conditions as well:

- Non-insulin dependent diabetes: dramatically improves insulin resistance while lowering blood sugar and improving lipid profiles. Furthermore, ashwagandha prevents the glycation (sugar binding to proteins) responsible for so many diabetic complications and aging in general.
- Neuroprotection: With anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, ashwagandha can prevent and treat animal models of Parkinson's and dementia.
- Arthritis: Exciting research indicates significant protection of cartilage with ashwagandha in a complementary fashion with glucosamine sulfate.

Caveats: As with any herb that can have wonderful effects, one must be aware of potential toxicities. As mentioned above, ashwagandha can significantly improve thyroid function, so appropriate laboratory monitoring is always suggested, especially if you are trying to "get off" of your current thyroid hormone prescription. If you take the medicine digoxin, ashwagandha can artificially appear to raise the concentration of this medicine on lab tests, but it in no way interacts with the medicine. Lastly, if you have an autoimmune disease, I recommend consulting with a healthcare practitioner knowledgeable in the use of herbal medicine prior to taking ashwagandha.

Dosage: The source of and dosage for this herb should be discussed with your healthcare practitioner, and only the highest quality herb standardized to an appropriate withanolides content should be purchased.

Your Journey to Health and Healing,
Gary E. Foresman, MD

References:

Available on Request

Website: www.middlepathmedicine.com

E-mail: info@middlepathmedicine.com