

Astragalus

This fact sheet provides basic information about the herb astragalus—common names, uses, potential side effects, and resources for more information. Native to China, astragalus has been used for centuries in traditional Chinese medicine. In the United States, the herb gained popularity in the 1980s. There are actually over 2,000 species of astragalus; however, the two related species *Astragalus membranaceus* and *Astragalus mongholicus* are the ones primarily used for health purposes.

Common Names—astragalus, bei qi, huang qi, ogi, hwanggi, milk vetch

Latin Names—*Astragalus membranaceus*, *Astragalus mongholicus*

What It Is Used For

- Historically, astragalus has been used in traditional Chinese medicine, usually in combination with other herbs, to support and enhance the immune system. It is still widely used in China for chronic hepatitis and as an adjunctive therapy in cancer.
- It is also used to prevent and treat common colds and upper respiratory infections.
- Astragalus has also been used for heart disease.

How It Is Used

The root of the astragalus plant is typically used in soups, teas, extracts, or capsules. Astragalus is generally used with other herbs, such as ginseng, angelica, and licorice.

What the Science Says

- The evidence for using astragalus for any health condition is limited. Results from small or preliminary studies suggest that astragalus may benefit heart function and help the immune system fight infections.
- A few studies have shown potential benefits for using astragalus—in combination with another herb, glossy privet (*Ligustrum lucidum*)—as an adjunctive therapy for cancer. In general, however, these studies were not well designed.
- NCCAM-funded investigators are studying the effects of astragalus on the body, particularly on the immune system.

Side Effects and Cautions

- Astragalus is considered safe for most adults. Its possible side effects are not well known because astragalus is generally used in combination with other herbs.
- Astragalus may interact with medications that suppress the immune system, such as the drug cyclophosphamide taken by cancer patients and similar drugs taken by organ transplant recipients.
- People should avoid using astragalus species such as “locoweed” that grow in the United States, as these other species may have different effects and side effects.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

Sources

Astragalus. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database Web site. Accessed at <http://www.naturaldatabase.com> on May 10, 2007.

Astragalus (*Astragalus membranaceus*). Natural Standard Database Web site. Accessed at <http://www.naturalstandard.com> on May 9, 2007.

Upton R. Astragalus. In: Coates P, Blackman M, Cragg G, et al., eds. *Encyclopedia of Dietary Supplements*. New York, NY: Marcel Dekker; 2005:25-30.

For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view:

- *What's in the Bottle? An Introduction to Dietary Supplements* at nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/
- *Herbal Supplements: Consider Safety, Too* at nccam.nih.gov/health/supplement-safety/

NCCAM Clearinghouse

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