



# Astragalus

*(Astragalus membranaceus)*

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## Background:

Astragalus comes to us from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), where it is first mentioned in Shen Nung Ben Cao Jing, a 2000- year-old classic as *Huang Qi*. *Huang Qi* means “yellow leader,” and astragalus is considered a most important tonic.

Traditional uses include lethargy, colds, flu, appetite (lack of), stomach ulcers, and deficiencies of *chi* (namely, general weakness and fatigue). Other Chinese uses include diabetes, lowering blood pressure, and water retention.

The plant is native to northern China where the 4-7 year old roots are harvested in the spring to make medicine preparations.

There are over 2000 types of Astragalus worldwide, but it seems that the Chinese variety has been the most studied.

Astragalus gummifera, also known as tragacanth, is an old friend of the pharmaceutical industry, long used as a thickening agent.

Widely known as an energy tonic in China, Astragalus is fast becoming as well known in the West as an immune strengthening agent, or what the Chinese call “protective

energy.”

The root of Astragalus contains a long list of tongue twisting phytochemicals. Of note are a series of cycloartane triterpene glycosides called astragalosides, a variety of polysaccharides with names like astragalen, and isoflavone glycosides, which some manufacturers use as a standardizing chemical despite reports of biological activity. A typical standard should be not less than .4% 4-hydroxy 3-methoxyisoflavone.

Based on clinical observations, Astragalus’ phytoactives have been shown to stimulate the growth of isolated human lymphocytes, potentiate immunological responses, and increase phagocytosis. In cells from cancer patients, which were resistant to immunostimulation, an Astragalus extract increased defense components called mononuclear cells (macrophages and lymphocytes).

## Modern Day Uses:

Current interest, while not limited to, are centered around Astragalus’ adaptogenic and immune building qualities. The Chinese use it as a classic energy tonic, often in place of Ginseng for people under 40 years of age. Many TCM experts find Ginseng may be too stimulating for younger adults. I guess us old farts can just hold our Ginseng a little better.

My greatest interest in Astragalus is its immune boosting action. Good Western

research has pointed to Astragalus' ability to restore normal immune function in cancer patients. Data suggests that patients undergoing chemo or radiotherapies recover faster and live longer if given Astragalus.

A second front that Astragalus may show value in is for HIV infection. Chinese studies with formulae containing Astragalus root found improvements in subjective measures and symptomatology. I am always guarded against offering false hope, but future and larger studies will help guide uses in this area, in addition to the treatment of myasthenia gravis.

I personally use an Astragalus-containing Chinese resistance builder during the cold and flu season. While not considered an herb for acute illness, Astragalus nonetheless is a valuable "wellness" botanical.

Many forms of Astragalus are available commercially. Most standardized extracts call for doses of 500mg two to three times daily. Dried root preparations might require dosages upwards of 4 grams daily.



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