

Patient Fact Sheet

ASTRAGALUS

ASTRAGALUS (*Astragalus membranaceus*) is a bush from Asia. Its roots are used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and it has also been used in the West since the 1800's. It is available as the dried root for making tea, in capsules, and in alcohol tinctures.

WHAT IS IT USED FOR?

- ◆ Astragalus is mostly used to prevent the common cold by stimulating the immune system.
- ◆ It has also been recommended for cancer, HIV/AIDS, asthma, allergies, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, heart problems, and liver problems.

WHAT HAVE STUDIES SHOWN?

- ◆ In several Chinese studies, patients who took an herbal mixture containing astragalus had fewer **colds**, and the colds they did have were less severe than expected. However, these studies did not compare astragalus to a placebo (sugar pill), and the patients were also taking other herbs.
- ◆ Astragalus can increase the amount of interferon (an infection-fighting substance) in the body. In people who have low white blood cells (the cells that fight infection) because of cancer treatment, astragalus can increase the number of white blood cells.
- ◆ An herbal mixture containing astragalus helped patients with **heart attacks** and **angina** by making their hearts work better. These studies did not compare astragalus to a placebo, and the patients were also taking other herbs.
- ◆ In one small study, a mixture containing astragalus and other herbs improved the liver function of patients with **chronic hepatitis** (liver disease).
- ◆ In two small studies, patients with **cancer** who took a mixture containing astragalus and other herbs lived longer than those who did not take it. All of the patients were also receiving radiation or chemotherapy. In other studies, astragalus mixtures helped reduce weight loss in patients with cancer.
- ◆ All of the human studies of astragalus in humans have either been very small, or they did not compare astragalus to a placebo. Better studies are needed to show whether astragalus is really effective.
- ◆ There are no studies of astragalus for people with **HIV/AIDS, asthma, allergies, diabetes, or chronic fatigue syndrome**.

WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS?

Allergic reactions, including rash, itching, and hives, are possible.

(continued)

No long-term problems have been found from taking astragalus.

IS IT SAFE FOR CHILDREN AND PREGNANT WOMEN?

There are no studies of astragalus' use for children or for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Related plants have caused miscarriages in animals, and heart problems in baby animals.

WILL IT INTERFERE WITH MY OTHER MEDICATIONS OR MY MEDICAL CONDITION?

- ◆ Astragalus is not recommended for people who already have a cold.
- ◆ It is traditionally used for diabetes, so it may lower blood sugar. People with diabetes should check their blood sugars frequently if they take astragalus, and their doctor may need to change their dose of insulin or other diabetes medication.
- ◆ Astragalus may lower blood pressure, so people who take blood pressure medication should have their blood pressure checked if they take astragalus, and watch for dizziness and other signs of low blood pressure.
- ◆ Astragalus may make it harder for the blood to clot, so it may not be safe for people who take blood-thinning medications including aspirin.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL DOSAGES?

Recommended doses of astragalus vary, but these are some recommendations:

- ◆ 1/2 tsp (1 to 4 grams) of dried root, boiled in one quart of water until it is reduced to one cup. One cup of this tea may be taken three times per day by mouth, OR
- ◆ 2 capsules (250 or 500 mg each) three times per day by mouth, OR
- ◆ 3-6 mL (about 1/2 to 1 teaspoon) of tincture three times per day.

Traditionally, astragalus is not used for more than three weeks at a time without careful monitoring. Also, astragalus is traditionally used in combination with other herbs. Follow your health care provider's instructions.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- ◆ Always tell your doctor or nurse practitioner if you are taking any herb, and before starting any new herb. Your health care provider needs to know everything you are taking to help you make decisions about your health care. Herbs can cause problems with other herbs, dietary supplements, or medications.
- ◆ Herbal products may contain chemicals or other species of plants. This is especially a concern with astragalus because it is grown in developing countries.

SEE ALSO:

Astragalus Complete Monograph: <http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/astragalus/astragalus.pdf>

Astragalus Clinician Information Summary:

<http://www.mcp.edu/herbal/astragalus/astragalus.cis.pdf>