

Ginseng — Does it work? How? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have been taking Ginseng (Korean 75mg) on and off regularly for a few years now and have noticed that it appears to reduce fatigue, enhance my sex drive and boost my immunity (fewer colds). I am a science teacher and a few of my colleagues argue that there is no scientific evidence for the alleged benefits of this supplement.

Are they right? Is it just the placebo effect? If it does work, what is its magic ingredient?

Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although you can happily tell your colleagues that there is in fact evidence that taking ginseng does have an effect on the body, know that further research is needed to better understand how ginseng really works. Responsible for the health effects derived from consuming ginseng are ginsenosides, of which there are different types and varying amounts depending on the ginseng (more on that in a bit). Kudos to you for doing your homework and raising your hand to ask questions about this supplement.

It might interest you to know that there are actually two types of ginseng: American and Asian (also known as Korean ginseng or Chinese ginseng), which are related and yet distinct from one another (in a few more ways than just geographically). Asian ginseng, which you mention in your question, is available as liquid, powders, capsules, and the intact root. Decades of research about the effects of Asian ginseng have had mixed results —studies on certain health topics were inconclusive, insignificant, or difficult to generalize to a larger population. Based on the research available, Asian ginseng may be beneficial in the following areas:

- Cognitive functioning
- Blood sugar among people with type II diabetes
- Erectile dysfunction
- Premature ejaculation

- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

List adapted from [National Institutes of Health](#) [2].

American ginseng is also available in a variety of forms, but is considered to have different health benefits compared to those derived from Asian ginseng. Although many studies on American ginseng are also inconclusive or point to no significance, an overview of the literature indicates that the use of American ginseng may improve the immune system — particularly in working to preventing colds and the flu and blood sugar among people with type II diabetes.

Consulting your health care provider before taking either type of ginseng is ideal due to possible side effects (e.g., headaches, gastrointestinal upset, high blood pressure, restlessness, insomnia, euphoria, among others) and interactions. It's best to be especially cautious if you:

- Drink coffee, tea, or alcohol (specifically with Asian ginseng)
- Take other medications, supplements, or herbs

Additionally, it's advised that the following folks either steer clear of ginseng or take it under medical supervision, which include:

- Children
- Pregnant or breastfeeding women
- People with high blood pressure, a history of hormone-sensitive conditions (including breast cancer), autoimmune disorders, and bipolar disorder.

Reader, although you have been taking — and appear to be reaping the benefits of — Asian ginseng off and on for years, it might be best to let your health care provider know that you've been taking it (if you haven't already). That way, s/he will be able to monitor any side effects you might experience and help you avoid potential interactions with current or future medications. And as you can probably appreciate, reading the label of all supplements is a recommended precaution to increase awareness of what you are putting in your body. It's also good to know that while companies that sell ginseng in any form have the go-ahead to manufacture and market their supplements, approval from the [Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#) [3] is not required (and thus, the onus is on the company to provide accurate information about safety and honesty in their health claims).

Class dismissed!

Alice!

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