

HEALTH

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TCM

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Could the tail of a turkey be good for your health? Or is this just another name for a fancy cocktail?

It's actually the common name for a particular mushroom. It's called turkey tail because of its fan shape, with shades of brown, white, and grey on its upper surface. It grows in overlapping clusters on dead logs.

The mushroom goes by other names, as well. In China, it's called *yunzhi* or cloud mushroom, because its shape and colour are reminiscent of clouds. In Japan, it's called *kawaratake*, which means "mushroom by the river bank". Its scientific name is *Coriolus versicolor*, although it's sometimes listed as *Trametes versicolor*.

The medicinal use of this mushroom has a long history in China. A description of it can be found in the *Compendium of Materia Medica* from the 15th century.

According to traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory, *Coriolus* is useful for strengthening physique, increasing energy and spirit and enhancing immune function.

It contains large numbers of chemicals that affect different parts of the body. These chemicals also interact with each other to

create certain health effects. This means the mushroom's functions are general, rather than specific in treating a particular disease.

In TCM practice, *Coriolus* is used to treat for various cancers, chronic hepatitis and infectious diseases. All of these conditions affect the immune system.

Researchers have long been interested in the mushroom's effects on immune function, and it's been most widely studied in relation to cancer.

In 1965, a Japanese chemical engineer investigated *Coriolus* for its anti-cancer constituents after a neighbour's life-threatening cancer appeared to go into remission as a result of using it.

This led to the discovery of polysaccharide krestin (PSK), an active ingredient found in the mushroom.

In 1984, another closely related component, polysaccharide peptide (PSP) – isolated by Qingyao Yang in China – was shown to have immune modulating functions.

Since then, scientists have tried to better understand the effects of this mushroom. From the time of the isolation of PSK and PSP until last year, scientists have studied its effects in relation to lung, breast, stomach, liver, leukaemia, esophageal, colon and bladder cancers in humans, mice, rats, rabbits and cancer cells directly.

The results of this research suggest the mushroom may have direct anti-cancer effects by helping support the body's



immune function by activating different types of white blood cells and increasing certain cytokines.

These are hormone-like, low-molecular-weight proteins, secreted by various cell types that regulate the intensity and duration of immune response and mediate cell to cell communication.

Today, there are several *Coriolus* products available in the market in Hong Kong and abroad. In 1999, annual sales of *Coriolus* products in Japan were worth more than US\$350 million. It also accounted for about 25 per cent of the anti-cancer drug market in Japan. It seems turkey tail may be good for health, after all.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Sheng-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner.