

HEALTH

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TCM

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Ginseng

Asian ginseng (*panax ginseng*), which includes Chinese and Korean varieties, has gained worldwide renown.

Even its scientific name, *panax*, alludes to its curative effects. *Panax* derives from the Greek roots *pan*, meaning "all", and *akos*, "cure", referring to "cure all", or "panacea".

According to Professor Shiu-Ying Hu, the earliest written account of Asian ginseng is from the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (from approximately the 1st century AD).

It states: "It is used for repairing the five viscera, quietening the spirit, curbing the emotion, stopping agitation, removing noxious influence, brightening the eyes, enlightening the mind and increasing the wisdom. Continuous use leads one to longevity with light weight."

In 1714, the first description of the plant by a westerner was provided by Pere Jartoux, a Jesuit missionary stationed in Beijing. "Nobody can imagine that the Chinese and Tartars would set so high a store on this root if it did not constantly produce a good effect. Those that are in health often make use of it, to render themselves more vigorous and

strong," the astute missionary observed.

According to the tenets of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the taste of Asian ginseng is bitter-sweet and warm.

It's a tonic used to increase strength, increase blood volume, promote life and appetite, quieten the spirit and give wisdom.

It's used alone or in prescriptions for general weakness, deficient *chi* patterns, anaemia, lack of appetite, shortness of breath with spontaneous perspiration, nervous agitation, forgetfulness, thirst and impotence.

Ginseng can greatly help to boost *chi*. When a person's *chi* is exhausted, they will die. Ginseng is therefore often used as a second line of defence in emergency situations, especially for shock and coma.

Asian ginseng's reputation for prolonging life has led to its use in cooking, health supplements and in teas.

But it can bring bad effects if not used properly. Overuse of ginseng is known as "ginseng abuse syndrome". Some of the undesirable effects include hypertension, nervousness, sleeplessness, oedema and diarrhoea. People have also reported confusion, restlessness and agitation.

There are some guidelines for using ginseng as a health supplement. It is best used during winter for someone lacking *chi* energy.

Some signs of *chi* deficiency include shortness of breath and

cold extremities. Ginseng should not be used if a person is suffering from a cold or flu because it not only promotes their vitality but also that of the pathogens infecting the person.

For someone who has a mild *chi* deficiency, American ginseng (*panax quinquefolius*) can be a good choice since it's mild. This type can be used in summer, especially if a person suffers from frequent thirst. But the same prerequisites as Asian ginseng apply and it should not be used if you have a cold or flu.

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