

In the last 10 years or so, andrographis paniculata has become popular in America and Scandinavia where it is used as a preventative and treatment for the common cold - hence its modern nickname - 'Indian echinacea'. But HSI Panellists have discovered that the herb has enormous potential in a far wider range of diseases. And now that the herb is available in the UK, we're delighted to bring you this report about its extraordinary benefits...

The global flu epidemic of 1918 was one of the most devastating infectious outbreaks in world history - more virulent even than the Black Death in the 14th century - killing 50 million people worldwide. No country escaped its onslaught but in India, an amazing herb, Andrographis paniculata, was credited with stopping the spread of the deadly virus.

Now, important new research has confirmed a host of pharmacological benefits for this herb, including potent anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial and anti-viral effects. In addition, scientists have discovered that Andrographis paniculata helps boost the immune system, protects against cancer, prevents blood clots and maintains efficient digestive functioning.

Andrographis paniculata is an annual plant with characteristic white-purple or spotted purple flowers that flourishes in South-East Asia, China and India. It has been valued for centuries by herbalists as a treatment for upper respiratory infections, fever, sore throat and herpes. Other reported applications include its use in cases of malaria, dysentery and even snakebites.

Andrographis helps your body fight infection and can reduce the length of a cold

Although scientists in the West have recently been uncovering the remarkable medicinal properties of andrographis, it has in fact been used in Ayurvedic medicine for hundreds of years.

Today it is prominent in at least 26 different Ayurvedic formulations used to treat liver disorders. The herb improves gall bladder function, increases bile flow (thereby aiding digestion), and has been found to be as effective as silymarin (active compound in milk thistle) in protecting the liver 1.

To date, the herb is best known in Western society as a popular over-the-counter alternative remedy for the common cold. Several double-blind clinical trials have shown that andrographis can reduce the severity of symptoms.

In one study involving 158 participants, andrographis or placebo was given daily for 4 days. By the second day those taking the herb showed significant improvements as compared to those given the placebo. Improvements were seen in relation to sleeplessness, nasal drainage and sore throat 2.

As a preventative for the common cold, studies show that andrographis may increase the body's resistance to infection by stimulating the production of antibodies and macrophages - large white blood cells that scavenge foreign matter. In a three-month trial involving 107 students, 54 of the participants took 100mg of andrographis twice daily, while the remaining students were given placebo. At the end of the trial only 16 students in the andrographis group experienced the signs of a cold, compared to 33 in the placebo group 3, 4.

Andrographis promotes a healthy heart by preventing blocked arteries and blood clots

Scientists today, however, are focusing on the herb's application in treating the 'killer' diseases that blight modern life, such as heart disease, cancer and even AIDS.

The main active constituent in andrographis is andrographolide, which in herbal medicine is referred to as a 'bitter' principle - so called because of its bitter taste. Indeed, andrographis is known as the 'King of Bitters'.

Bitter herbs generally have an affinity with the heart, liver and gall bladder and most have a cooling effect on the body and can bring down a temperature.

According to studies in China, andrographis is effective in preventing the formation of blood clots and preventing the re-clogging of arteries after angioplasty - a technique used to treat blocked arteries by inserting a balloon into the blood vessels which is then inflated to widen the artery 5.

Further research shows that the herb activates fibrinolysis, a natural process in the body in which blood clots are dissolved. It also relaxes the smooth muscle in the walls of blood vessels and has a blood pressure-lowering effect 6.

Performs as well as many conventional drugs but without the harmful side-effects

Andrographis extracts are cytotoxic (cell-killing) against cancer cells. Positive results have been seen in relation to stomach, skin, prostate and breast cancer cells in test-tube studies 7.

In fact, recent laboratory tests in New York have demonstrated that andrographis may inhibit the growth of human breast cancer cells just as well as the drug tamoxifen 8.

The herb's anti-viral activity has been demonstrated in HIV and AIDS. Andrographis prevents the virus from infecting healthy T-cells and inhibits the spread of infection, while other studies show that the herb is able to fight HIV in cells even after they have been infected 9.

Scientists have found that andrographis hinders HIV from taking over a 'control enzyme' in certain T-cells that triggers the multiplication of the virus. This action is the same as AZT, a commonly used AIDS drug with a number of debilitating side-effects, including a low blood count 9.

Finally, andrographis extracts are showing promise in relieving diarrhoea associated with E.coli bacterial infections 10.

In one study, andrographis was given to 1,611 people with bacterial dysentery and 955 people with diarrhoea. The results showed an overall effectiveness of 91.3 per cent 11.

What to take for best results

The suggested dosage for andrographis is 400mg twice a day (for up to 10 days). Although andrographis has been found to be safe in humans, animal studies suggest it may impair fertility. Safety in young children and pregnant or nursing women has not yet been established.

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