



Andrographis

Andrographis As An Immune Booster

In Europe, pharmacists are more likely to recommend andrographis to stave off a cold than echinacea. In the last few years, *Andrographis paniculata*, an ancient weedy shrub native to India and Southern Asia, has become one of the best-selling cold remedies in Scandinavia. Not only does it rival echinacea's ability to effectively treat cold and flu symptoms, but at lower doses, it may help prevent colds as well.

Although andrographis' virtues as an immune system booster are only beginning to receive recognition in Western medicine, Indian and Chinese healing systems have used it numerous ways for centuries.

For example, in India, andrographis was widely credited for arresting the 1919 Indian flu epidemic. Two double-blind placebo-controlled studies from Sweden on the herb offer similar support. The first study (*Phytomedicine*, 1997) involves 107 18-year-old students. Half took 200 mg of andrographis (standardized to contain 5.6 percent andrographolides—the active constituent) daily for three months. The other half took placebo. By the end of the trial, 16 students in the andrographis group had developed colds, compared with 33 students in the control group.

In the second study, andrographis reduced cold symptom severity (*Phytomedicine*, 1999). Of 158 adults with colds, participants given 1,200 mg daily of andrographis (standardized to contain 5.6 percent andrographolides) experienced significant improvements by the second day of treatment, and improved further by day four, compared with participants who received placebo. The symptoms that improved the most were earache, sleeplessness, nasal drainage and sore throat, though other cold symptoms improved as well.

In traditional Chinese medicine, andrographis is known as a cooling, detoxifying herb. Andrographis is reputed to detoxify "fire poison", which means it has shown anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial action. It is sometimes combined with isatis root and dandelion to make a patented Chinese remedy called Chuan Xin Lian.

The Chinese herbal *Materia Medica* recommends Chuan Xin Lian for inflammatory problems and infections of the lungs, throat and urinary tract as

well as skin sores. Andrographis is also frequently used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat HIV, cardiovascular disease, liver and gastro-intestinal problems. I would use it for viral sore throats, swollen glands, colds with thick yellow or green mucus and as an adjunct remedy for inflamed acne. It appears to be safer than echinacea for long-term use - (few long term use studies for echinacea exist, and there is some concern of overstimulation of the immune system with its long term use.)

Andrographis has helped my patients with flu symptoms - it is effective in reducing the intensity and duration of symptoms if taken within 24 hours of onset. The combination of echinacea and andrographis, together with vitamin C and bioflavonoids, may be effective for severe flu symptoms. More importantly, I have never observed adverse effects, and I feel safe prescribing it with other treatments, both prescription and non-prescription. Once more research is published I feel andrographis may gain recognition as a safe immune booster.

Andrographis is available in formulas standardized to contain between 4 percent and 50 percent andrographolides. The dose depends on the strength of the preparation. Some herbalists believe that andrographolides do not affect the immune system as much as the whole-plant extract; others disagree and feel that the standardized andrographolide extract is the best indicator of potency because that is where the research is. (The whole-herb research is lacking in general, since a plant's quality can vary widely depending on soil and other factors) Nevertheless, andrographis herb tea or tonic is commonly used in India both as a cold remedy and preventative.

Research has found andrographis to be safe at low to moderate doses (in the cold studies, doses ranged from 200 mg to 6 g). Preliminary evidence suggests that it may temporarily reduce fertility in mice, though this has not been shown in humans, and subsequent research did not repeat these findings. The andrographolide constituent may also cause dose-related increases in liver enzymes, such as ALT, which return to normal when use is discontinued (*Phytotherapy Research*, 2000). If long term use is anticipated such as for acne inflammation, or for long term use to boost the immune system I recommend periodic evaluation of liver enzymes - as always I feel that patients should discuss this with their primary care physician!