



Ginger

(Zingiber officinale)

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Literature Education Series On Dietary Supplements

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Background:

To most of us in the United States, Ginger is a popular seasoning, but for literally thousands of years, it has been used as a medicine in addition to a wonderful food enhancer. The botanical name Zingiber is derived from the ancient Hindu language meaning “horn-shaped” in reference to the protuberances on the root, which is the part of the plant used both in cooking and in medicine. Technically, however, it is the knotted and branched rhizome (underground stem) that is really used, even though we commonly call it the root.

Cultivated for thousands of years in both China and India, the plant is not known in the wild, and its exact origin is not clear. We know that Ginger reached the West a couple of thousand years ago from tax records left behind by the Romans. The Greeks and Romans thought Ginger came from an Arabian region because it was imported from India across the Red Sea. We also know that Ginger was traded into Europe about 800 years ago because of duty records dating back to 1228.

Ginger in China

In China, dried Ginger, known as Gan-jiang is mentioned in the earliest of herbals, *She Nung Ben Cao Jing*, attributed to Emperor Shen Nung, about 2000 BC. Legend has it that Nung, by inventing the cart and plow, taming the ox and yoking the horse, and teaching his people to clear the land with fire, reputedly established a stable agricultural society in China. The *She Nung Ben Cao Jing*, his catalog of 365 species of medicinal plants, became the basis of later herbological studies. Chinese records dating from the 4th century BC indicate that

Ginger was used to treat numerous conditions including stomachache, diarrhea, nausea, cholera, hemorrhage, rheumatism, and toothaches.

The Chinese believe that much of Ginger’s powers come from its ability to bring fluids to an area, warming it up. They say that it can mobilize the body’s defenses. Through its thermogenic action, heat is produced along with more secretions and sweating, which drives out toxins and microbes. Immunity is increased due to the presence of more white cells, and better circulation spreads the improved healing powers throughout the body.

In modern China, in addition to being an essential ingredient in almost every culinary dish, Ginger is used in about half of all herbal prescriptions. One of the main reasons it is added to so many Chinese medicinal mixtures is its ability to act as the “messenger” or “servant” or “guide” herb that brings other herbal medicines to the site where they are needed. In India, studies are showing that adding Ginger to certain drugs can enhance the absorption of the medication. One day, this may lead to Ginger being used for a biopotential effect.

Ginger in the United States

The Spaniards transplanted Ginger from the East Indies to Spain and then later, after the discovery of America, naturalized it here. It was popularized by the Eclectic school of medicine around the turn of the 20th century, as exemplified by the following excerpts from an 1898 medical journal. *“This remedy is so common that many of our text books do not deign to mention it; however, it is an excellent remedy and should have a place beside the capsicum bottle on the shelf of every dispensary. It is classified as a stimulant, carminative, diaphoretic, errhine (promotes nasal discharge), sialagogue (promotes salivation), rubefacient (a counterirritant like muscle rubs), etc.”*

“It is pungent, aromatic, and grateful to the taste.”
“...we believe this remedy is a neglected one. Many times it could be given with, or in alteration with, other

remedies to advantage..." "It is a stimulant to the digestive tract, and after all, everything depends upon digestion and assimilation. This tract is to the body what the firebox is to the engine; not enough fire and fuel, not enough steam; not enough food and absorption, not enough blood, or life." "It promotes digestion by stimulation; it removes or prevents flatulence, thereby relieving or overcoming spasm and colic."

"...assists in promoting the secretions and in reducing high temperature, etc. In atonic dyspepsia and enfeebled states of the alimentary tract, with specific nuxvomica, ignatia, etc, or with so called bitter tonics if you prefer them, Ginger is an excellent remedy. In diarrhoea, in cholera morbus, with nausea and vomiting, with cold extremities and surface of the body, don't forget Ginger."

It is interesting to note that almost all the benefits of Ginger reported in this journal have been validated by modern science. Crude Ginger, Ginger extracts, and Ginger oleoresin were formerly official drugs of the *United States Pharmacopoeia* and *National Formulary* as a carminative, aromatic and stimulant. In another official compendium of yesteryear, the *King's American Dispensatory*, Ginger was indicated for loss of appetite, flatulence, stomach gurgling, spasmodic gastric and intestinal contractions, and coldness of the extremities. Today, Ginger is official in the pharmacopoeias of many countries. In the Chinese pharmacopoeia, Ginger is listed as an approved drug for epigastric pain with cold feeling, vomiting and diarrhea accompanied by cold extremities and faint pulse, dyspepsia, and cough. The Ayurvedic pharmacopoeia additionally lists it for flatulence and intestinal colic.

Modern Day Uses:

While Ginger will prove to be valuable for the treatment of multiple problems, the overwhelming scientific support is weighted to pro-digestion and its antiemetic actions. Other applications may include its use in arthritic conditions, cold and flu, and as a supportive herb in botanical combination therapies.

Digestive uses

Consider Ginger as a stimulant of digestion. Consider it if you are having problems with gas; use it as an antispasmodic, if you have problems digesting fats, or having problems with appetite, or just an ordinary stomachache.

Nausea and vomiting

Many clinical trials support the use of Ginger against nausea and vomiting, both prophylactically and acutely, from a variety of causes, including motion sickness, perioperative anesthesia, morning sickness, flu, and even drug side-effects.

About one-third of all people receiving anesthesia for surgery suffer from postoperative nausea and vomiting.

Because of all the complications that can occur after surgery, giving less drugs is better than giving more drugs, and there isn't an available anti-nausea medication that is both effective and has no side effects. Unless we dig it out of our garden, that is. Ginger (500 mg orally) was shown to be effective when administered prior to surgery. In fact, none of the subjects tested, in a 1990 study, required postoperative treatment for nausea or vomiting. This was not even the case with the drug against which Ginger was tested.

Some Chinese cooks keep a small piece of Ginger in their mouth to prevent nausea from strong cooking odors. And, not that I would ever endorse overindulgence in alcohol, but if it occurs, add some Ginger to your hangover treatment.

Other uses

Ginger tea is often used for colds and flu. It can produce perspiration and increase circulation, thus potentially helping to speed the removal of toxins from the body. Ginger may also help with the pain and inflammation of diseased joints. It works topically and could be considered a valuable ingredient in a pain rub. And, don't be afraid to try Ginger for any of its other folkloric uses. It can't hurt and may help.



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