

# Ashwagandha

**Ashwagandha** or *Withania somnifera* is an ayurvedic herb that has been used for centuries in India as an adaptogenic herbal remedy to improve overall health, vitality and longevity. It is a short shrub that grows naturally all around the Indian subcontinent; but is also native to the Middle East and North Africa. Ashwagandha is now also grown in North America and other temperate climates as its popularity increases. In western countries, Ashwagandha is also referred to as Winter Cherry.

The **Ashwagandha** plant itself is a hardy small woody shrub with small flowers and distinctive red seeds. The shrub can grow from 150 to 200 cm tall. The plant can thrive in moderate drought conditions and is often found where other plants cannot survive. Ashwagandha naturally occurs in all areas of South Asia up to a moderate altitude.

Ashwagandha benefits our health in various ways. The plant is believed to improve memory, support the immune system and generally aid in optimizing the physiological functions of the body. Although it is thought to work in a non-specific way to improve general health, it does have many specific characteristics that are worth noting. There is evidence that Ashwagandha has significant anti-inflammatory and anti-tumor properties. It is also thought to possess anti-stress properties and the compounds found within the herb are anti-oxidants. Historically the herb has also been used as a sex-enhancing tonic owing to its potent activity as an aphrodisiac. Ashwagandha has a broad spectrum character that has earned it the name 'Indian Ginseng', since it has played a central role in India in a similar fashion as Ginseng has historically in China.

Use of Ashwagandha can be traced back to at least 4000 years. It has been used predominantly as an adaptogen for therapeutic purposes in Ayurveda. The use of Ashwagandha in ayurvedic tonics and mixtures is generally through addition of dried and ground roots and berries. Sometimes a water based tincture is also used as a medicine, however since the active ingredients in Ashwagandha tend to degrade in potency when in this tincture form, the former powdered method is preferred. In addition to its medicinal use, Ashwagandha is also extensively used at home in the form of tea. Dried ashwagandha root is boiled for up to 15 minutes and the resulting tea is consumed several times a day. Finally, as the herbs popularity has soared globally over the last couple of decades, Ashwagandha consumption in the form of capsules and liquid has become wide spread. It is now common to find a variety of brands of Ashwagandha capsules and pills available in specialty health stores and through holistic supply sources throughout the world.

In Ayurveda, Ashwagandha is considered to be a potent 'rasayana' herb. This means that it is a rejuvenator and promotes vitality and longevity. Ashwagandha is rejuvenating and strengthening to the nervous system, and it works as a mild depressant to the over agitated nerves whilst nourishing and protecting. So it is excellent for stress induced disorders such as Insomnia, Anxiety, Neurosis.

If an individual has a very high metabolism, traditional Ayurvedic practitioners will generally avoid administering Ashwagandha. The herb is also considered to be a 'Medhya Rasayana', meaning that it will rejuvenate all three ayurvedic aspects of the mind, namely comprehension, memory and recollection. As such one of the many favored uses for Ashwagandha in Ayurvedic practice revolves around helping individuals to improve their mental function and power. 'Rasayana' in ayurveda is also analogous to fire; hence increasing the Rasayana of an individual is analogous to increasing their internal fire. To this end, the use of Ashwagandha in ayurveda is generally limited to use with other herbs. In essence, using Ashwagandha on its own is not recommended and it should be administered with other herbs that counter its strong rejuvenating properties. For example, Ashwagandha is prescribed for chronic fatigue most often in combination with other herbs and minerals such as Shatavari, Amla, Licorice, calcium and magnesium.

Over the past decade or so, there has been an upsurge of interest in Ashwagandha. This is especially true in Europe and North America. This can be attributed in part to an overall increase in acceptance of alternative therapies and natural preventive medicines in these parts of the world. As such there has been renewed interest in cultivating Ashwagandha for export from India. Most health stores in the West now carry Ashwagandha in one form or another and the herb has started to join the ranks of ginseng and reishi mushrooms as an overall health enhancer. The scientific community has also received Ashwagandha with keen interest and several studies have been performed which lend credibility to many of the health benefits associated with Ashwagandha. For the most part no significant negative effects have been observed, but Western studies caution against the use of Ashwagandha by pregnant women. Ironically, the herb is actually administered in India to pregnant women under some circumstances as an aid to help the fetus. From this angle, the science on Ashwagandha is still in its infancy and caution is a must.

Ashwagandha is thought to have a moderating impact on thyroid function. As such through an adaptogenic effect, Ashwagandha decreases thyroid activity in cases where the thyroid is overactive. Conversely, if the thyroid gland is under active, ashwagandha stimulates additional activity. A word of caution; there is a lot of conflicting information online about how ashwagandha effects the thyroid gland. And while ashwagandha has a long history of use stretching many millennia without any significant side effects noted, it is still always important to first consult a health care provider before starting to take the herb to target a thyroid condition.