



WHAT'S UP WITH...

Adaptogens

Stressed? Can't focus? Low energy? High energy? Feeling too normal? Read this before you try the latest supplement craze.

BY MICHAEL EASTER

SEVENTY-NINE PERCENT of Americans say they're stressed-out—thanks, work, screaming kids, social media, and deciding what to have for dinner tonight—which explains the rise of the multibillion-dollar anti-stress marketplace. With a bevy of attractive, shiny options, you can choose between established practices—therapists and an array of prescription pills—and more esoteric stuff like meditation, tapping, and yoga. The newest in the latter category: adaptogens, a group of (supposedly) stress-fighting plants that are showing up in today's trendiest teas, coffees, and snack foods.

Adaptogens (a hard-to-pin-down category that even the dictionary defines only as “plant extracts that increase the body's ability to resist stress”) come from obscure and god-awful-tasting plants, roots, fruits, and fungi that survive in harsh conditions, making scientists believe they help humans do the same. They're sold for a too-high price with too-gorgeous packaging in too-precious web stores like Moon Juice and Goop. They have exotic, spelling-bee-finals names—including ashwagandha, rhodiola, reishi, *Panax* ginseng, and *Cordyceps*—and promise to take you back to your center and make you feel normal again, no matter what's going on.

Such vague and sweeping declarations typically send our BS detectors into threat level midnight. But some nonquacky experts are finding glimpses of truth in the far-out claims.

Brenda Powell, M.D., director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic, for example, often recommends adaptogens when people with anxiety and depression aren't sure they want to take pharmaceuticals. “Adaptogens can help lessen the physical reaction you have from stress,” she says.

It works like this: When stress strikes, your hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, a complex system that controls your stress response, fires a surge of the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol. In the long term, this can cause chronic inflammation, the problem that's now linked to so many of the top-killing diseases of our time, says Roy Chengappa, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh who has researched adaptogens.

A daily dose of adaptogens, the theory goes, may help your cells turn on their stress-protecting mechanisms. That increases your HPA axis's stress threshold, meaning you may be able to take on more stress, or that the same level of stress will have less of an impact, says Dr. Powell. Think of it as tuning the engine of a car: If the car used to overheat around 70 mph, you can make it so that 90 is the new overheating point and 70 is an easy drive.

A review in *Pharmaceuticals* suggests there's merit to the thinking, and studies in humans give it support. Among them is the Creighton University research that found drops in C-reactive protein—a marker of inflammation linked to stress—in people who took a supplement that included Siberian ginseng and rhodiola for four weeks. Another looked at ashwagandha—a shrub whose Sanskrit name translates to “smell of horse,” because it has the funk of a damp filly—and saw that subjects who received it along with counseling had a 57 percent drop in anxiety, while counseling-only people experienced just a 31 percent dip.

Promising results, indeed, but medical authorities aren't proposing you trade in your Zoloft for rhodiola yet. Studies have been small, so there are still big question marks. Plus, adaptogens can interfere with prescription drugs (including some immunosuppressant, sleep, and anti-anxiety meds) and can upset your stomach unless you take them with food.

Where that leaves you: Stress is a problem. And in America, we sell solutions, including stress-busting powders, pills, and chocolate bars. We get the appeal. But there's probably a better way to manage what gets thrown at you. “If someone wants to use adaptogens, I get them to figure out what's causing their stress, which is usually some questionable behavior pattern,” says Trevor Kashey, Ph.D., a biochemist and nutrition consultant in Columbus, Ohio. “Then I ask if they think a magic mushroom or root powder will fix that pattern and, well, you can guess what they say.” Still, if you want to sip an adaptogen-spiked chai while you're sorting your stuff out, it may make you feel better, if only because you're making a move to shake off stress.

ADAPTA-WHAT?

IF IT SEEMS LIKE adaptogens are everywhere, it's because scientists have identified at least 54 of them, and many go by a few different names. Yet there are only a handful that we know much about so far; most others still sit in the “What the heck does this do?” category.

