

# Wise up with ashwagandha

THE “PRINCE OF HERBS” DESERVES ITS THRONE  
WITH HEALTH-MINDED CONSUMERS

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PAID CONTENT

**INDIAN HEALERS HAVE BEEN USING ASHWAGANDHA**, the “Prince of Herbs,” to help people feel better for five millennia. Its popularity among Americans, however, has begun to grow only within the past few years. What does this plant do and why is this stinky prince ascending to the North American botanical throne? Here’s the scoop.

## AN ADAPTOGENIC ACE

Ashwagandha, *Withania somnifera*, is a small woody shrub that grows in India and a few parts of the Mediterranean and Africa. Its name is derived from the Sanskrit word for horse, “ashwa,” referring to the root’s pungent odor. It is also thought to imbue horse-like strength and stamina. Traditionally, ashwagandha, also known as Indian ginseng, has been used as a general Ayurvedic “life extender,” and to boost endurance and reduce stress, among other uses. The herb is used today to support brain and cardiovascular health, reduce stress response and support sports performance and sexual health. “Five thousand-year-old Ayurveda is the oldest articulated health system we know,” says medicinal plant researcher Chris Kilham. “There are more than seven and a half thousand herbs used in Ayurveda. Ashwagandha is at the absolute top.”

Ashwagandha is an adaptogen—an agent that helps the body adjust to stress. Stressors can be anything from lack of sleep to the demands of a new job. Adaptogens help the body achieve balance, or homeostasis. “While most herbs have an impact on a specific bodily function, true adaptogens work on several at once,” says supplements industry veteran Jeff Lind, former vice president of sales and marketing at Natreon, an Ayurvedic ingredient supplier best known for Sensoril, its patented extract of ashwagandha roots and leaves. “They stabilize physiological processes to create real, lasting health.”

While ashwagandha is an extraordinarily complex plant, its power to regulate physiological processes comes mainly from flavonoids, called withanolides, that regulate hormones. Experts believe there is much more to the plant than the withanolides and that the synergistic effect from the plant’s diverse ingredients drives the herb’s multiple therapeutic properties. Among adaptogens, Ashwagandha stands out because it supports both stress reduction and enhanced cognition. Most herbs that boost cognition tend to stimulate, rather than reduce stress.

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## ANCIENT HERBS SELL FOR MODERN WOES

Sales of Ayurvedic herbs have been increasing steadily, with overall sales more than doubling since 2005 to reach \$270 million in 2015, according to *Nutrition Business Journal*. Between 2016 and 2017, Ayurvedic herb sales grew by 20 percent. Researchers estimate that 2018 sales will reach \$554 million, with superstar turmeric claiming \$280 million of the pot. Sales of Ayurvedic herbs are expected to reach \$826 million by 2021.

The boost in Ayurvedic owes a golden debt to the recent rise in awareness and efficacy of turmeric, which was an easy leap for Western consumers because of its popularity as a spice in foods. Now, consumers are moving to the next level with adaptogenic herbs such as ashwagandha, with mainstream media taking note. And the use of ingredients such as ashwagandha, reishi and maca in popular functional beverages has raised awareness about their stress-relieving properties through media exposure, according to Holly McHugh of Imbibe, an Illinois-based beverage development firm. "Its emergence unsurprisingly coincides with consumers questioning conventional western medical wisdom and rediscovering eastern medicine practices including the role of diet."

"The utter failure of the Western medical paradigm," which may excel at crisis intervention, but has failed miserably at treating chronic degenerative disease, is one of the issues fueling the rise of herbal alternatives, according to Roy Upton of the American Herbal Pharmacopoeia. People are tired of targeting one condition at a time. They're tired of side effects even more.

The issues ashwagandha helps with are the conditions caused and exacerbated by the stressful chaos of today's lifestyle. "In our modern times, what we need most are agents that can help reduce the stress we live with," says Kilham. "Ashwagandha has an extraordinary capacity to lower serum cortisol [stress hormone] levels so people feel better, they're not as anxious and they sleep better."

Another reason for the rise of the botanical is that people can feel its effects. "Consumers actually feel something when they take it," says Lind. "With most supplements, you know on an intellectual level that it's helping—you know a multivitamin is rounding out your diet or that vitamin D is good for you—but you don't necessarily feel a difference. With ashwagandha, the experiential nature offers reassurance that it's doing something." Lind likens this to glucosamine and chondroitin, both highly experiential joint health ingredients, which sparked a huge growth spurt for supplements in the 1990s.



## RETAIL PROMOTION

"Adaptogen" has become somewhat of a buzzword in the industry, but these ingredients are novel and unfamiliar to the average consumer," says Imbibe's McHugh. Make sure staff are able to explain what adaptogens, and what Ayurvedic medicine, are. There's lots of scientific data. Use it. Signage with infographics and handouts that explain recent science in simple terms can also help shoppers recognize the plant's potential. In addition to displaying ashwagandha products and information where standalone supplements are sold, retailers are seeing success featuring information about the ingredient in other areas, such as the mood and sleep shelves, says Natreon's Brown.

The botanicals' story can also be featured in the beverage and tea aisles, where it can call out mood, sleep and focus, he says. There are lots of opportunities to help roll out the retail carpet for the Prince of Herbs, conveying this ancient plant's potential to help today's consumers thrive in stressful, modern times.

## BEYOND SUPPLEMENTS

While ashwagandha has been mainly delivered to consumers through supplements, its inclusion in new categories, especially functional beverages, is spreading. Ashwagandha can currently be found in a variety of teas, gums, energy drinks, functional waters, chocolates, meal-powders and even burgers.

## THE SCIENCE: A growing number of published studies are boosting ashwagandha's popularity for a range of common conditions

### STRESS

Multiple studies suggest that ashwagandha reduces feelings of stress and anxiety as well as levels of cortisol in people who experience chronic stress.

### COGNITIVE HEALTH

Research among healthy adults and adults with mild cognitive impairment found that the root extract improved brain function, including general memory and information processing speed.

### JOINT PAIN

Studies suggest ashwagandha reduces joint pain and inflammation.

### SEXUAL PERFORMANCE

Research supports using ashwagandha to improve sexual function, too, for both men and women. One study found a 167 percent increase in sperm count after 90 days of use.

### CARDIO-VASCULAR HEALTH AND ENDURANCE

Studies suggest the root enhances cardiorespiratory endurance among healthy men and women.

### SPORTS PERFORMANCE

Studies suggest ashwagandha can help sports performance as well, boosting muscle strength and reducing muscle damage.

## CHOOSE CAREFULLY

### ✓ Go for quality

Look for products that use high-quality (certified organic, if possible) ashwagandha.

### ✓ Pay attention to quantity.

Kilham says to also be sure to consider the amount used in the product compared to the amount used in the relevant studies.

### ✓ Seek trusted science.

Make sure the clinical studies are published in high-quality, credible outlets such as PubMed-indexed journals and that the trials were conducted on normal, healthy subjects if the end product is for a general audience.

### ✓ Look for full spectrum.

This will help ensure you're reaping the whole benefits of the plant.

### ✓ Choose branded.

A recent ConsumerLab test found that only 25 percent of ashwagandha products tested passed review. Try and find a company that uses a branded ingredient you can trust to contain clear product specifications and high bioactive composition such as Ixoreal BioMed's KSM-66 Ashwagandha, made from the plant's root, and Natreon's Sensoril, made from the root and the leaf. Both full spectrum ingredients have many published clinical studies to support their use.