

# Adaptogens: Herbs for Beating Stress, Fighting Fatigue & Banishing Cravings

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July 15, 2014

***Specialty chocolates. Organic coffee and green tea. Gluten free baked goods. Energy bars and drinks.*** There's no shortage of quick energy fixes lining the shelves of even "healthy" stores, including Whole Foods. I think it's safe to say that we're in the middle of a human energy crisis! And the health conscious set is not exempt from grabbing foods and beverages that provide quick fuel.

The problem is that sugar and caffeine – even their in glorious organic, artisanal forms – don't fix our energy problems for very long. In fact, they just make it worse, causing us to be on a roller-coaster of sugar highs and lows, and ultimately, sugar and energy crashes.

**The good news is that nature has provided us with a whole category of herbs called adaptogens that help us get to the real root of our energy crisis: adrenal imbalances.**

## What is the Adrenal Stress Response?

Your body has an entire stress response system that is hardwired to protect you from danger. Its basecamp is your adrenal glands, tiny little organs that sit on top of your kidneys, and mastermind a whole lot of your health from blood sugar to hormones to mood.

The system has existed for millennia and is meant to protect us from immediate danger – since this system is ancient, a saber-toothed tiger chasing us is the common example. When the adrenal response system goes into action, it rallies to protect you by pumping out adrenaline and cortisol. These ramp up your blood sugar so you can run (for example, away from that proverbial tiger), increase your blood pressure so you don't go into shock if that tiger bites you, increases your heart rate to keep those running muscles supplied with oxygen, crank out insulin to help clean up the sugar after the crisis is over, and activate your immune responses so you don't get an infection, again, from that tiger bite. When the danger is gone (i.e., the tiger got the slower guy), your system quiets back down and you quickly recover from the stress. No long-term harm is done.

**But when you are a state of constant stress, like most of us are, the body perceives this as a persistent low level of danger. The stress response system stays in the “on position,” and leads to a host of symptoms, and potentially, health problems.** Eventually, the system itself burns out, leading to what is commonly called “adrenal fatigue.” Most of us are either in a state of adrenal overdrive or are heading in the direction of, or have reached, adrenal fatigue.

## **Symptoms of Adrenal Imbalance**

**Here are just some of the many common symptoms and health problems caused by adrenal imbalances:**

- Blood sugar problems, insulin resistance
- Brain fog, concentration problems
- Difficulty falling asleep (you feel “tired and wired”) or restless sleep
- Digestive symptoms
- Fatigue, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Feeling stuck in the “on” position – overwhelmed and overdrive
- Food cravings, especially for sugar, carbs, or fatty foods, and afternoon sugar or caffeine cravings
- Frequent colds, infections
- High blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes
- Hormonal imbalances, PMS, fertility problems, menopause symptoms
- Inflammation, joint pain, fibromyalgia
- Irritability, anxiety, or depression
- Waking up tired in the morning
- Weight gain (especially that “spare tire” or those “muffin tops”)

If you have any of these symptoms or conditions, it is important to pay attention to what’s going on in your adrenal stress response system and to restore balance.

## **Adaptogens: Ancient Medicines for Modern Times**

**Adaptogens are a special class of herbal medicines that have been used in Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicines for centuries to promote a sense of well-being.**

In those systems, these herbs are considered the “Kings” and “Queens” of herbal medicines for restoring health, vitality, immunity, stamina, and promoting longevity. The term adaptogen refers to the unique ability of these herbs to help you adapt to the stress in your life. They do this by “normalizing” or “regulating” the adrenal stress response. Adaptogens help your body to cope more effectively with the demands of everyday life. They provide a sustained sense of calm, and while they increase energy, with the exception of Chinese ginseng, they are non-stimulating.

In addition to their effects on stress adaptation, adaptogens have profound antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects that protect your cells from damage from a variety of chemical exposures. Also, one of the definitions of adaptogens is that they are non-toxic, even with long-term use. You can rely on these herbs to be safe and gentle.

## **How Adaptogens Work**

**Adaptogens are truly remarkable in that the chemicals they contain actually help to normalize adrenal function.**

They calm and nourish the adrenal glands, and support the processes that are controlled by the adrenals – from blood sugar and immune system regulation, to hormones and blood pressure. Amazingly, they work whether you are experiencing adrenal over-stimulation, or adrenal fatigue. In fact, not only do they help you to adapt, but they also adapt to your particular biochemical needs!

While some adaptogens can work fairly quickly, in just a matter of days, their actions tend to be more subtle, with benefits building up over months of taking them regularly, either in capsules, tablets, or tinctures, as discussed below.

## **Choosing the Adaptogens That Are Best for YOU**

Most of my patients receive an adaptogen or a formula containing a blend of adaptogens as part of their health plan – after all, who isn't dealing with some level of stress! I generally recommend a combination of 3 of the ones below that seem most specific to the patient — but you really can't go wrong as long as you look at the cautions — these are very safe, and are very synergistic with each other. You can also find a combination product that includes several of these together.

Not all herbs referred to in the popular media as adaptogens truly are; however, the ones below meet all the scientific criteria for being in this category. There is quite a bit of cross-over in the effects of these herbs, so they can be used somewhat interchangeably, but each also has its own slightly unique “personality,” or what it is especially known for, as emphasized in the descriptions. All of these can be used in any combination. Adaptogens work best when taken for a minimum of 3 months, and for as long as a year!

Remember, there's more to living a balanced life than just taking herbs – but these botanicals can go a long way to helping you to restore your balance, your health, and your sense of well-being.

**Here are my top 6 favorite adaptogens for women:**

## 1. Ashwagandha: The Soothing Adaptogen

Ashwagandha has over 4,000 years of traditional use in India. It is considered both a food and a tonic medicine for improving energy, memory and learning, promoting libido, and preventing premature aging. Ashwagandha is calming and anti-inflammatory. It is used to improve sleep, reduce anxiety, improve memory, and reduce inflammation and oxidative stress (damage from inflammation). It boosts the immune system, is included in the treatment of arthritis and can be beneficial in the treatment of fertility challenges.

**Dose:** 3 to 6 grams of the dried herb in capsule form daily OR 2 to 4 mL (20-80 drops) of tincture, in water, 3 times per day

**Cautions:** Not for use in pregnancy; though not likely to be a problem, use cautiously if you are sensitive to plants in the nightshade family; avoid with pharmaceutical sedatives and pain medications.

## 2. Rhodiola: The Spirit Calming, Anti-Anxiety Adaptogen

Rhodiola extract helps promote a calm emotional state and supports strong mental performance, optimal immune function, and hormonal balance. It is a key adaptogen for reducing anxiety. It improves mental and physical stamina, improves sleep, and reduces stress, “burn out,” and irritability. It boosts the immune system, decreases the frequency of colds and infections, and reduces inflammation. It is used in the treatment of chronic fatigue syndrome as well as fibromyalgia. It can be beneficial for poor appetite and as part of a treatment plan for chronic stress headaches.

**Dose:** 200-400 mg in capsules or tablets daily OR 2-3 mL (40-60 drops) of tincture, in water, 2-3 times daily. Use products standardized to 2-3% rosavin and 0.8-1% salidroside

**Cautions:** Avoid if you have bipolar depression with manic behavior.

## 3. Holy Basil: The Vitalizer

Holy or “sacred” basil has been revered in India for over 5,000 years as an herb that calms the mind and spirit, and promotes longevity. In Ayurvedic medicine it is called Tulsi, which means “incomparable one.” It is used to improve energy and relieve fatigue, for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant actions, and to lower blood glucose, triglycerides, and cholesterol. Holy basil may also protect the liver, helps

with nicotine withdrawal, and elevates the mood, especially providing relief from mild depression. While this herb is related to common basil, it is a different species and common basil is not a substitute.

**Dose:** 2-3 mL (40–60 drops) of tincture, in water, three times daily

**Cautions:** None known.

## 4. Shatavari: The Hormonal Harmonizer, Queen of Women's Adaptogens

Shatavari is considered the “Queen of Herbs” in Ayurvedic medicine, where it is beloved as one of the most powerful rejuvenating tonics for women. It is nourishing and calming, as well as hormonally balancing; it is used for irritability and many hormonal imbalances affecting the mood, for example, emotional symptoms of PMS and menopause. It is also used as a fertility tonic and may be used for vaginal dryness, low libido, and sleep problems in perimenopause. In addition, research suggests benefits for improving immunity, antioxidant activity, improved insulin secretion, reduction in gastric acidity, and the prevention of stress ulcers. It has mild estrogenic and cholesterol-lowering effects.

**Dose:** 2-4 mL (40-80 drops) of tincture, in water, 2-3 times daily

**Cautions:** Avoid if you have a history of estrogen-receptor positive cancer.

## 5. Eleuthero: The Performance and Focus Enhancer

Eleuthero is one of the most well-researched adaptogens. It is used to increase mental alertness and performance, enhance concentration and increase energy and stamina, reduce stress and fatigue, reduce dream-disrupted sleep and insomnia, and enhance immunity and improve detoxification. It is anabolic, which means it helps build muscle and prevents the breakdown of muscle as we age.

**Dose:** 2-3 g of dried root in capsule daily OR 2-4 mL of tincture, in water, 2-3 times daily

**Cautions:** There have been rare cases of insomnia reported with Eleuthero; if you have insomnia, either select a different adaptogen, or consider taking only before noon; also Eleuthero is not recommended for those with high blood pressure.

## 6. Reishi Mushroom: The Immune Nourisher

Reishi mushrooms are highly regarded in Chinese medicine to nourish and support adrenal function. While Reishi is best known for promoting health immunity, resistance to colds and infections, and reducing inflammation, Reishi also helps support the body's natural abilities to detoxify from environmental exposures, and also calms the nervous system, promoting deeper, more relaxing and restorative sleep.

**Dose:** 3-9 grams of the dried mushroom in capsules or tablets daily OR 2-4 mL of reishi tincture, in water 2-3 times daily

**Cautions:** Avoid with blood thinners and medications that lower blood pressure, based on theoretical risks of drug interactions.

**Some of my favorite Adaptogen products that contain the above herbs include:**

**Stress Manager** (Herb Pharm): A blend of the liquid extracts of Eleuthero root, Reishi fruiting body, Holy Basil leaf, Rhodiola root, and Schisandra berry

**Adrenal Health** (Gaia Herbs): Capsules with a blend of Ashwagandha, Holy Basil, Rhodiola, Schisandra, and Wild Oats

**Vital Adapt** (Natura Natural Products): A blend of the liquid extracts of many well-known adaptogenic botanicals including Eleuthero root, Rhodiola, Schisandra and Ashwagandha.

**HPA Adapt** (Integrative Therapeutics): Capsules with a combination of 5 adaptogenic herbs such as rhodiola, Sensoril brand ashwagandha, and eleuthero root extract.

### **Are There Any Other Times NOT to Use Adaptogens?**

Due to lack of safety data, I do not recommend adaptogens for use during pregnancy, however they are considered safe for use while breastfeeding, and can help new moms to cope with the stress and demands of sleepless nights! I also do not recommend adaptogens if you are taking any medications that suppress the immune system, unless your doctor also approves, as there can be herb-drug interactions in this case.

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With love and wishes for your optimal health!

A handwritten signature in cursive script. The word "Aviva" is written in a large, flowing style. Below it, the letter "B" is written. A long, sweeping line extends from the "B" to the right, ending in a decorative flourish consisting of two interlocking loops.