Health Focus_V7 1 2025/05/27 06:36



BALANCING ACT

Are adaptogens the answer to chronic stress?



We're experiencing an unhappiness pandemic. According to ***gallup.com***, in 2022, four in 10 adults worldwide said they experienced a lot of worries (41%) or stress (40%). It's fair to say that stress is a significant part of life, whether emotional, physical or environmental. Still, too much of it can affect your body's response, leading to various diseases, including cognitive impairment and mental disorders, cardiovascular diseases and reduced immune response.

Standard treatments include medication, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and exercise; however, a new plant-based powerhouse has joined the stress-busting battle: adaptogens.

WHAT THE HERB ARE THEY?

'Adaptogens are natural substances in herbs and plants that resist and protect the body against physical, chemical or biological stressors,' says Registered Dietician Yolandé van der Riet. 'Some examples of stressors include extreme heat or cold, exercise, illness, emotional stress and fatigue.'

One theory is that they help the body maintain an overall balance (homeostasis) by acting on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, a communication system between three organs, the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland and the adrenal glands, whose job is to return the body to homeostasis – think of it as your central stress response system.

Adaptogens help regulate the production of cortisol, the primary hormone released during stress, and the release of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine. And they enhance the body's ability to maintain balance under stress by increasing resistance to stress and decreasing sensitivity to stressors, resulting in stress protection, and prolonging the resistance phase. Lastly, they improve mitochondrial function, meaning your body can use oxygen, glucose, lipids and proteins more effectively, providing you with more energy.

WHO POPS PLANTS?

Adaptogenic plants have been used in traditional medicine in India, China, Korea and Japan for thousands of years to improve stress resistance and increase adaptability, resilience and survival, regardless of the stressor.

During World War II, pilots and submarine crews took stimulants to improve their mental and physical performance, as documented in studies published in Soviet Union WWII military journals. Nanai hunters used adaptogens as a tonic to reduce thirst, hunger and exhaustion, and to improve night vision. The Toxicologist Lazarev introduced the concept of 'adaptogens' in the '50s.

'Generally, people resort to adaptogens to manage stress, improve stamina and energy, enhance resilience, and support mental focus and clarity,' says Yolandé. 'There's increased information on perimenopausal and menopausal women turning to adaptogens to better cope with physical and emotional stress during their hormonal transitions.'

> ***They are a supportive tool.***

HOW-TO

Adaptogens are sold and taken in various forms, including capsules, tinctures, teas, powders or the whole herb. People often take them in the morning or early afternoon, depending on the herb or potential interactions with other supplements or medications.

Yolandé lists numerous reasons to consult with your GP or a registered dietician before taking adaptogens. Credible scientific evidence is limited, but it's growing, especially research on their effects on stress and fatigue. Current studies focus on a small sample size and are short-term. Another shortcoming is that there's more evidence for some adaptogens than for others.

Health Focus_V7 2 2025/05/27 06:36



> ***People resort to adaptogens to manage stress...***

In South Africa, adaptogens are sold as supplements or complementary medicines, not as drugs. The South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) regulates them, but not as strictly as pharmaceuticals.

Your healthcare provider is knowledgeable about your health, current medications, the actions of individual adaptogens, and how these aspects interface. They can also help mitigate potential risks, side effects and drug interactions associated with adaptogens. 'These include (a) overstimulation (e.g., with ginseng or rhodiola), (b) hormonal effects (e.g., ashwagandha may affect thyroid function), (c) blood pressure changes (e.g., liquorice root), (d) insomnia, (e) jitteriness, (f) digestive upset, (g) allergic reactions, or (h) they can interact with blood pressure, thyroid, antidepressant or immune-suppressant medications,' she says.

Several clinical studies have shown that rhodiola diminishes or eliminates depressive symptoms. For example, 58 patients with stress-induced depression took this adaptogen for up to four months. They reported feeling less worn out in the morning, improved sleep and less time spent in the hospital while using a combination of rhodiola and antidepressants.

Are adaptogens a cure for conditions like anxiety or stress disorders? 'They shouldn't replace evidence-based medical care or prescribed medication,' says Yolandé. 'But they are a supportive tool to help your body manage mild to moderate stress or fatigue and improve your overall quality of life.'

COMMON ADAPTOGENS



ASHWAGANDHA

Ashwagandha translates into 'sweat of a horse', presumably because the root, which is the part of the plant used medicinally, is thought to smell like a damp horse. It's used in Ayurveda.
Best for: Reduces anxiety, supports adrenal health and improves sleep.



RHODIOLA

One of the most-studied adaptogens, thought to have been used by Vikings to improve physical strength and endurance.
Best for: Increases energy, enhances mental clarity and boosts stress resistance.



SCHISANDRA

One of TCM's 50 fundamental herbs, this is thought to protect health and prolong life. It was first recognised as an adaptogen in the '60s, based on research from Russia.
Best for: Supports liver function, reduces fatigue and boosts endurance.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK