

THE TRUTH ABOUT ASHWAGANDHA

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While ashwagandha is not new (in fact, it's been used for thousands of years), it has recently gained popularity especially with people looking to relieve stress and improve health. So, what should you know about ashwagandha?

What is Ashwagandha?

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), also referred to as "Indian ginseng" or "Indian winter cherry", is a well-known and commonly used herb in Ayurveda (a traditional and holistic system of medicine that was developed in India over 3,000 years ago). It's a woody, evergreen shrub that's found in India, the Middle East, and Africa. The roots contain most of the health benefits. Ashwagandha, in the Sanskrit language, is a combination of the words "ashwa" which means "horse" and "gandha" which means "odor", all thanks to a wet horse smell that emanates from the plant's roots. Ashwagandha is an adaptogen (a natural substance that helps the body maintain a balanced state and normal function). Extracts of ashwagandha are available in powder form, gummies, and capsules to be taken by mouth. It's also sold in creams and oils that can be applied to the skin (topical), but the safety and side effects of topical ashwagandha are not known.

The Write RN

What are the benefits of Ashwagandha?

- **Combat stress and anxiety** – This is the health benefit that ashwagandha is best known for. When faced with a stressful situation, the adrenal glands in the body release hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Chronic stress causes the cortisol level in the blood to remain elevated which can be harmful to the body and impair brain function. Research published in *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* shows that ashwagandha is considerably effective at reducing the cortisol level in the blood, thereby helping to reduce stress and its effects on the body.
- **Improve sleep** – The *Public Library of Science* journal published research that revealed that ashwagandha is beneficial in improving overall sleep, albeit a small but positive effect.
- **Suppress inflammation** – A major compound found in ashwagandha is Withaferin A. Research published in *Antioxidants* has demonstrated that Withaferin A has powerful anti-inflammatory properties.

Other Uses

Ashwagandha is also claimed to have other properties such as reducing the risk of cancer, helping with rejuvenation and anti-aging, improving memory, increasing fertility in men; however, the available data is not sufficient or consistent enough to confirm these benefits.

Possible Side Effects and Interactions

Ashwagandha is considered possibly safe for you to take for a short period of time (usually 3 months), but its long-term use beyond 3 months has not been thoroughly investigated.

Some people have reported stomach issues, including diarrhea and vomiting, when they took ashwagandha in large doses. Liver problems have also been reported, but those instances were rare. The side effects and safety of ashwagandha when applied to the skin is not known.

Ashwagandha can have interactions with medications that you may already be taking, either prescription or over the counter, such as medications that suppress the immune system (immunosuppressants), benzodiazepines, sedative medications, thyroid medications, medications for diabetes, and medications for high blood pressure. Ashwagandha can also affect other herbal products or supplements you may be taking.

You should always check with your doctor or healthcare provider before taking ashwagandha or any other supplement.

How Should You Take Ashwagandha?

The recommended dose for adults is up to 1000 mg of ashwagandha root extract per day (that's usually one 500 mg capsule taken by mouth two times daily) for no more than 3 months.

Do **NOT** Take Ashwagandha If:

- You're pregnant or breastfeeding.
- You have an autoimmune disease.
- You're scheduled for surgery (stop taking it at least 2 weeks before surgery).
- You have a thyroid condition.

So, Here's the Truth: Based on reputable evidence, ashwagandha can help reduce stress, anxiety, and improve sleep quality. It can be taken for up to 3 months at a recommended dose of up to 1000 mg per day. Some people had stomach upset when they took ashwagandha in large doses. It can have interactions with other prescription or over-the-counter medications and other supplements. People with certain conditions such as pregnancy, nursing mothers, those with a planned surgery, autoimmune disease, thyroid disease should not take ashwagandha.

Safety Tips When Buying Supplements:

- ✓ Always check with your doctor before taking any supplement or herbal product.
- ✓ Always make sure the product you're buying is safe.
- ✓ Choose brands that are certified by third party organizations such as UL or United States Pharmacopeia (USP).
- ✓ Read the label for information and directions.
- ✓ Stay informed about the product and pay attention to alerts, recalls, and advisories.

The information provided in this article is not intended nor is to be used to diagnose, prescribe, or treat any medical condition. It's not a substitute for medical advice.



Resources

Cheah, K. L., Norhayati, M. N., Husniati Yaacob, L., & Abdul Rahman, R. (2021). [Effect of Ashwagandha \(Withania somnifera\) extract on sleep: A systematic review and meta-analysis](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257843). *PloS one*, 16(9), e0257843. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257843>

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