Do you frequently get colds every winter? Do you often come down with the flu? While avoiding sick people and washing your hands can help you to avoid sickness, strengthening your immune system is your best defense. Consistently restful sleep, daily exercise, a whole foods diet, and keeping your vitamin D3 at an optimal level are powerful ways to strengthen the immune system. Herbs, including astragalus, can also be an important part of your immune system support.

**Other common names:** milk vetch, huang qi, radix astragali  
**Botanical name:** *Astragalus propinquus* (syn. *Astragalus membranaceus*)  
**Family:** Fabaceae (pea)  
**Parts used:** root  
**Energetics:** slightly warming, slightly drying  
**Taste:** sweet  
**Plant properties:** immunomodulator, antioxidant, hepatoprotective, cardioprotective, adaptogen, diuretic  
**Plant uses:** immune system dysfunction (from frequent colds and flu, seasonal allergies, HIV, cancer), angina, hypertension, hepatitis, fatigue, asthma, prolapsed organs, weak limbs, anemia  
**Plant preparations:** decoctions, cooked with food, powdered, capsules, tincture
Astragalus comes to us from China, where it has been used for thousands of years to strengthen the immune system. However, it has quickly integrated itself into Western herbalism. In a poll of practicing herbalists, it placed 16th among the top 50 herbs commonly used by Western practitioners. There have been no high-quality clinical trials using astragalus, so most of our knowledge comes from its extensive use in Traditional Chinese Medicine and, more recently, its use by Western herbalists.

**TYPES OF ASTRAGALUS**

There are more than 2,000 different species in the Astragalus genus. Some of these plants are toxic, and no other species are known to have the same qualities as Astragalus propinquus (syn. Astragalus membranaceus), although a few are used medicinally. Make sure you buy or grow Astragalus propinquus and not one of the many other plants in the same genus.

**MEDICINAL PROPERTIES AND ENERGETICS OF ASTRAGALUS**

Astragalus root is a supreme herb for the immune system and an adaptogen, an herb that helps build and restore overall health to the body. Numerous studies have shown it to be a valuable ally for illnesses as serious as cancer, and it also powerfully protects people from getting frequent upper respiratory ailments such as colds and the flu. Astragalus root also contains many protective properties for the heart, liver, and kidneys, making it a wonderful herb to consider for preventive care.

Astragalus is a key herb in the classical Chinese formula Yu Ping Feng Pian, also known as Jade Screen Formula. This formula is used to form a protective shield and keep pathogens from entering the body. Herbalist Paul Bergner explains, “In Chinese medical terms, astragalus builds up the protective chi. Imagine that there is a protective shield around your body, just below the surface of the skin, that keep out cold and other external influences. It vitalizes the non-specific immune defenses and wards off infections. This is the protective chi, and astragalus is the premier herb in Chinese herbalism to strengthen it.”

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FOR IMMUNE SYSTEM SUPPORT

Herbalists refer to astragalus as an immunomodulator, a broad term that basically means that it positively influences the immune system, making it stronger. From limited human clinical trials and from in vitro studies, we know that astragalus increases the white blood cell count, decreases viral replication, and stimulates the production of T killer cells.\(^2,3,4,5\)

I used to get colds throughout the winter and suffer through the flu nearly every year. My immune system was clearly defeated and falling prey to everything that came my way. Now I rarely catch an upper-respiratory infection, and I attribute that to regularly drinking astragalus chai and keeping my vitamin D3 level in the optimum range. I've seen many people reduce the frequency of their own colds and flu by doing these two things. (I've included a recipe for Astragalus Chai in this chapter.)

Herbalists recommend astragalus to alleviate the side effects of chemotherapy treatments. One study used astragalus injections alongside chemotherapy in patients with malignant tumors. As compared to the patients receiving chemotherapy alone, the patients receiving the astragalus injections had inhibited tumor development, less functional impairment, elevated immune function, and improved quality of life.\(^6\)

FOR IMPROVED ENERGY

Herbalists regularly recommend astragalus for people with adrenal fatigue, fibromyalgia, and chronic fatigue syndrome. But you don’t have to be ill to get benefits from astragalus. In one study two groups of athletes received either a Chinese herbal formula with astragalus as a main ingredient, or a placebo. After eight weeks those taking the astragalus formula had increased endurance and enhanced recovery from fatigue. The researchers concluded that it worked “by increasing the oxygen uptake and the systemic utility of oxygen.”\(^7\)

FOR YOUR HEART, KIDNEYS, AND LIVER

Astragalus has been studied extensively for its effects on improving heart function, even in patients with extreme cases of congestive heart failure.\(^8\) In one study, patients with congestive heart failure were divided into two groups. One group was given an injection of astragalus (roughly 80 grams of the bulk herb), and the other group was given conventional treatment. After four weeks, both groups showed improvements, but cardiac function was significantly better in the group receiving the astragalus injections.\(^9\)

This herb has also been shown to prevent and repair damage to the kidneys and liver due to medications or viral infections. In one study, a combination of astragalus and angelica was shown to improve renal function in chronic kidney disease patients.\(^10\)
HOW TO USE ASTRAGALUS

Astragalus slowly nourishes the body deeply over time, so don’t expect immediate results. Because it is food-like, herbalists recommend that it be taken daily, in large amounts and for an extended period. Astragalus has a mild, sweet taste and can be cooked into foods or enjoyed in teas.

You can often find astragalus root sold in bulk in three different ways: sliced, cut and sifted, and powdered. Avoid buying roots that look like long tongue depressors, as these often contain chemical yellow dyes.

I like to buy the sliced root for soups (since it is easy to remove) and the finely cut and sifted root for use in tea blends. When using the sliced whole root in food (soups, rice, quinoa, etc.), you will always have to remove the root since it is too fibrous to eat.

RECOMMENDED AMOUNTS

I recommend people use large amounts of astragalus, anywhere from 10 to 30 grams per day, as they do in Traditional Chinese Medicine. It is difficult to get this dose using a tincture or capsules.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure you buy or grow Astragalus membranaceus, not one of the many other plants in the same genus.

Take astragalus to prevent colds and the flu; however, avoid it during acute illness. (One exception is that if someone is sick and has a lot of deficiency symptoms, astragalus might be used to strengthen the person to boost them toward wellness.)

Do not use astragalus with immunosuppressive drugs. (It interacts with recombinant interleukin 2 and recombinant alpha interferon 1 and 2.)
ASTRAGALUS CHAI

Drinking this delicious chai is a wonderful way to support your immune system during the winter months. The spices warm you up from the inside out, making this a perfect tea for the colder times of the year. Because astragalus root comes in a variety of shapes and sizes and are hard to measure out by volume, I recommend using a scale to measure it by weight.

Yield: 1 serving

1. **Stove method:** Place all the ingredients in a pan with 2½ cups of water. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes, covered. Strain, then add milk and honey as desired. Drink within 36 hours.

2. **Slow cooker method:** Place all ingredients in a slow cooker with 2½ cups water. Set it to low heat and let it cook overnight, covered. Inspect the amount; if it looks low, add more water. Strain, then add milk and honey as desired. Drink within 36 hours.

- 20 to 30 grams astragalus root (approximately 15 to 20 small slices)
- 1 tablespoon dried orange peel*
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger
- ½ tablespoon cinnamon chips
- ½ teaspoon whole peppercorns
- 1 or 2 cardamom pods
- 2 whole cloves

* Store-bought dried orange peel comes in small, uniform pieces. If you make your own, be sure to mince the orange peels finely before drying them, as they are difficult to cut once dried.