Sharpen Your Mind

Gingko biloba has been shown to protect brain cells from damage.

Question. Can ginkgo biloba truly improve memory, as products claim? And is it true that it can keep the mind from deteriorating with age?
R.J., Kelseyville, California

Answer. The leaves of ginkgo biloba have been used medicinally for almost 5,000 years. The herb continues to be in wide use today. “Ginkgo,” as it’s often called, is reported to be among the most commonly used herbs in the world.

In fact, more than a dozen well-designed clinical trials have shown it can help improve mental function, especially in people over age 50.

It does this primarily by improving blood flow to the brain. It also protects the brain from free-radical damage, which occurs in our bodies because of environmental and physiological factors such as stress, exposure to pollutants and aging. Ginkgo also enhances communication between brain cells.

One study examined the effects of it in 60 elderly people (average age of 74) who had mild to moderate mental impairment. Each person was given a standardized extract of ginkgo at a dose of either 40 milligrams or 80 milligrams, or a placebo (an inactive substance) three times a day.

After three months, those taking the lower dose experienced a

significant improvement in attention, concentration and short-term memory. And as a side benefit, they also experienced an unexpected drop in blood pressure. (Interestingly, those in the study taking the higher dose of ginkgo didn't experience any greater benefit.)

Gingko has also been shown to protect brain cells from damage and death. Our brain cells naturally die off during our lives, but stressful events can accelerate their expiration and result in impaired mental function. Stresses such as exposure to toxins or a reduced delivery of oxygen to the brain may either kill brain cells or activate genetic "programming" in brain cells that cause them to die.

Scientific research on ginkgo has repeatedly shown that it has the ability to inhibit the stress-related death of brain cells. In some studies, ginkgo's protective effects appeared to stem partly from its ability to neutralize free-radical damage in brain tissue. Other studies have found that ginkgo works at the DNA level to inhibit programmed cell death. Still others have found that the flavonoid components in ginkgo protect brain cells from damage caused by the kind of deposits found in the brains of Alzheimer's patients.

Whatever the theory, gingko biloba clearly protects and enhances the survival of our brain cells.

Question. The holidays are approaching, and I'm going to be traveling a lot to visit family. Is there anything natural that helps with motion sickness?
S.N., Vancouver, Washington

Answer. Would you believe that ginger, the same spice that

many of us loved in gingerbread when we were children (and even as adults!), has been shown to combat motion sickness very effectively?

In fact, in one study, researchers for the Swedish navy tested it on 80 naval cadets sailing in heavy seas. Compared with the sailors who took a placebo (an inactive substance), the group of cadets taking ginger experienced 72 percent less seasickness.

In capsule form ginger has been used for many ailments, such as circulatory problems, dizziness, nausea, indigestion and ringing in the ears. Because of the anti-inflammatory properties of ginger, this multipurpose herb is also being used extensively for the treatment of arthritis, including rheumatoid arthritis and migraine headaches.

Ginger has hardly any side effects; but, as with all herbs, you should read the label carefully for proper use and dosage. (Too much ginger could actually cause gastrointestinal upset or stomach ulcers.)

A word of caution: Ginger should be taken under the care of a physician if you are taking anti-coagulants or anti-inflammatory medications, including aspirin.

This is very important because ginger can interact with these medications and cause serious problems with hemorrhaging. Also, no one with gall bladder disease should take ginger.