



Can Ashwagandha (*Withania Somnifera*) be used as an herbal medicine in the management of erectile dysfunction?

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Erectile dysfunction is defined as the inability to achieve or maintain an erection adequate for a male's sexual gratification. It is one of the most common chronic conditions reported by men over the age of forty years of age. This condition impacts on the patient's quality of life because of self-esteem, but also on the ability to maintain intimate relationships. It is therefore understandable that this condition has enjoyed considerable attention and many advances have been made in the treatment and management of it.

Numerous factors can contribute to the development of erectile dysfunction. These include hormonal imbalances, physiological problems, psychological factors, as well as poor lifestyle choices. The underlying principal is a lack of proper blood supply to the penis. Whether it's arterial insufficiency (resulting in low arterial pressure) or venous insufficiency (excessive venous outflow due to inadequate compression of the subtunical venules), the lack of proper blood flow to the organ is the main cause. Exacerbating factors contribute to this, and these, as well as the main cause, needs to be addressed if the problem is to be resolved. Whatever the hormonal deficiencies, especially testosterone or hyperprolactinemia, have been identified amongst other risk factors in the development of erectile dysfunction. Others include excessive smoking and alcohol consumption, recreational drug use, inactive lifestyles and uncontrolled diabetes.

Unani-Tibb defines disease as an imbalance in the humours of the body, and this applies to erectile dysfunction as well. According to Tibb, erectile dysfunction can be classified into two categories: Type one, a Phlegmatic imbalance, and type two, a Bilious imbalance. Therefore, treatment from a Unani-Tibb perspective will be holistic in nature and aim at addressing imbalances according to the six lifestyle factors.

According to Unani-Tibb medicine, *Withania Somnifera* (also known as Indian Ginseng, Winter Cherry, and Ashwagandha) is classified as both Hot and Dry in the second degree. This implies that the herb can be utilized to effectively treat illness conditions and health problems characterized by Moistness and Coldness. The herb works by restoring balance amongst the humours, and thereby assisting Physis in its curative activities.

This implies that Ashwagandha is best suited to treat type 1 erectile dysfunction (Phlegmatic) which is characterized by an over abundance of Coldness and Moistness. Support for this comes from clinical studies which have focused on the role of various hormones in the presentation of erectile dysfunction syndrome. The herb has been found to effectively treat hyperprolactinemia (a cold and moist imbalance), which is regarded as a major contributing factor in erectile dysfunction syndrome.

Withania Somnifera has received research attention due to its anxiolytic and anti-depressive properties. The herb and its active constituents have shown significant promise in the treatment of depression and anxiety, and this is of extreme importance when seen from the Tibb perspective, which identifies emotions as one of the six lifestyle factors involved in living a healthy lifestyle. Addressing psychological factors is necessary in the treatment of erectile dysfunction syndrome, and *Withania Somnifera* has shown great promise in this field.

Another area that has enjoyed attention is the effect that *Withania Somnifera* has on haematological processes in the body. One of the main causes of erectile dysfunction syndrome is low blood pressure, as well as insufficient blood oxygenation. Animal studies of the herb have shown significant increases in haemoglobin, red blood cell count as well as hair melanin. Serum cholesterol was also observed to have decreased.

The main benefit of Indian Ginseng lies in the naturally occurring biochemical constituents found mainly in the root of the plant. These include alkaloids, withanolides, and several saponosides. All of these extracts/components have enjoyed increased scientific scrutiny, and they are being considered in the treatment of tardive dyskinesia, osteoarthritis, Parkinson's Disease as well as a anti-microbial agent.

Apart from the above mentioned benefits of the herb, it also has a significant advantage over conventional medications in that it has nearly no side effects. Whereas conventional medications utilized in the treatment of erectile dysfunction syndrome include headaches, indigestion, hepatic poisoning as well as polycythaemia, the only danger from using *Withania Somnifera* is in overdose. Overdose results in gastrointestinal upsets. As the herb is a mild central nervous system depressant, it should not be utilized in conjunction with sedatives, alcohol and other anxiolytics.

With relative, easily ingestible doses, the herb has many potential benefits, and is ideal for the treatment of erectile dysfunction syndrome as mentioned above.