



Tests show the rhodiola herb can enhance endurance and reduce stress

Health: Herbal Stress Buster?

Can a Russian root be good for your health?

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Feb. 3 issue — As a Soviet soldier in Afghanistan in 1979, Zakir Ramazanov discovered a tonic that helped him reduce stress, while boosting mental and physical energy. It wasn't alcohol, but tea—made from the golden-yellow roots of a Siberian plant called *Rhodiola rosea*, which the Siberian soldiers received in their mothers' packages from home.

Scientists are still unraveling the clues to rhodiola's effects. But animal research indicates that it reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol, while optimizing levels of key brain chemicals involved in mood. It also appears to boost synthesis of a molecule known as adenosine triphosphate (ATP), which cells need to produce energy. "When you see how it works, the effects make sense," says Dr. Richard Brown of Columbia University, who has given rhodiola to 300 patients for depression and other disorders. "It has no side effects that we've noticed—only side benefits."

Still, doctors note that more research is needed on long-term complications and adverse drug — interactions. (So far none have been noted.) And they sound the standard warning that pregnant women should not try new herbs. Even doctors who are open to rhodiola caution that any benefits may be modest. Dr. Andrew Weil, perhaps the nation's leading herbal arbiter, has been taking rhodiola for six months and notes "increased energy, but nothing dramatic." Others may have no energy boost at all, if the real problem is a medical disorder such as an underactive thyroid.

Rhodiola also won't help if you buy a bad product. Reliable brands at present include Arctic Root, Rosavin, Rhodax, Clear Energy and Longevia, which cost \$20 to \$50 for a month's supply. Look for bottles that say *Rhodiola rosea*—not *Rhodiola sacra* or any other rhodiola species, as these lack the active rosavin compounds.

But such caveats cannot dampen the enthusiasm of radio host Liz Sterling of Boca Raton, Fla. After taking Longevia for two months, she says, "it's as if my shoulders have lowered, and stress just rolls off." We should all be so lucky.