

Adaptogenic Tonics: an approach unique to herbal medicine

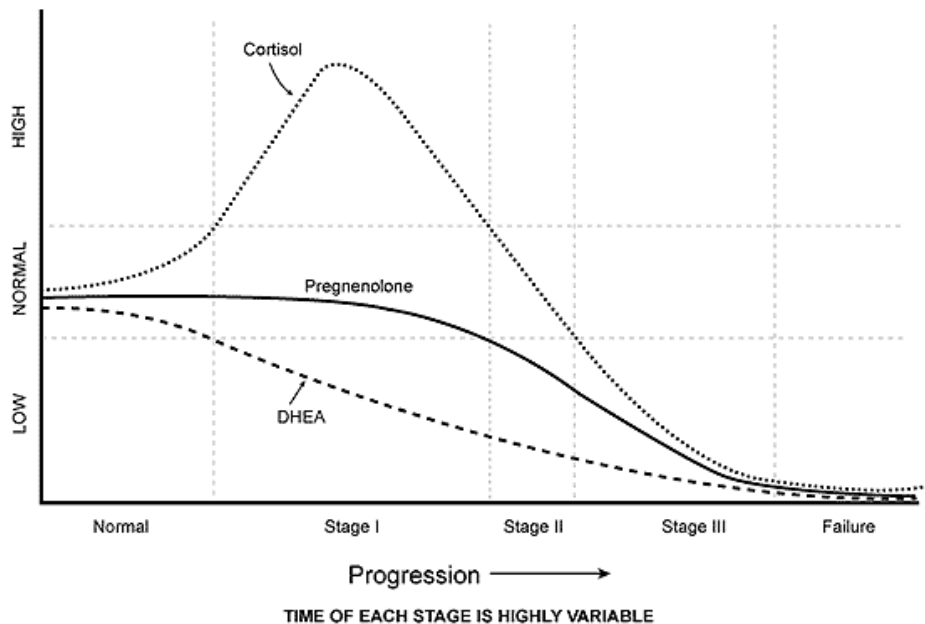
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Background, stress physiology, vital energies of the human system

An “adaptogenic” herb helps the human system to adapt, or respond, to demanding and stressful situations. Traditionally, these plants have been used to normalize the function of tissues and organs, helping to increase their efficiency and reduce inflammation. They can often have widely ranging effects, like either raising or lowering blood pressure, depending on the individual. Usually, they are very safe and non-toxic, unlike medicines designed to exploit a specific biochemical mechanism. Many, in fact, are very food-like and probably derived from basic nutritional strategies. Thus, like food, the dose of many adaptogens is relatively high (exceptions noted below).

The human physiology responds quite well to external pressure. This response is mediated by the nervous system and adrenal hormones, the most notable being adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline’s effects are almost instantaneous, and impact all physiological systems, enhancing performance and shutting off digestion. Cortisol’s effects peak about 30-40 minutes later, reducing immune-mediated inflammation and raising blood sugar. Repeated stress within 30-60 minutes will see diminished adrenal response, followed by cortisol overproduction; chronic repeated stress will greatly reduce all available hormone levels, leading to exhaustion, depression, anxiety and lack of focus, hormonal disruption, systemic inflammation, insomnia, digestive disturbances, and immune dysfunction.

Progression of Stages of Adrenal Exhaustion



Adaptogenic herbs can help buffer the stress response, helping to reduce recovery time between stressful events and decrease the system's sensitivity to outside disruption (reducing the perceived frequency of stressful events). Some of their chemistry has been linked to results in vivo (licorice, rhodiola, and the ginsengs for example), but we still know little, from the biochemical perspective, about how they work. So, for best results, it is important to understand a little about herbal and human energetic concepts and the traditional ways of classifying the adaptogenic herbs.

Yang represents activity, movement, high performance, and arousal. It is an energy that is responsible for waking us in the morning, and very much embodied in the adrenal stress response and in fevers. It tends to be warm, dry, and expansive. **Yin** represents rest, digestion, relaxed awareness, and reduced inflammation. It tends to be cool, moist, and contracting. Both of these energies are required, and they are in constant interplay to maintain a relative state of balance (with occasional excesses of each in turn). These can be seen as two separate adrenal forces, and either one can be excessive, or deficient. The person in question will offer clues as to their energetic balance.

Traditional western herbalism looks at the relative degrees of **heat** and **moisture** in an individual, helping with more warming herbs if the person is cool, or moisturizing herbs if there is systemic dryness. Some ideas are listed below. Getting an understanding of the energetic pattern for a person is very useful in selecting the right adaptogen: after all, these plants are classified and *known* by their energies – that's how they have been studied for thousands of years. We're still waiting for biochemistry to catch up and offer a new perspective.

<p>Yang excess: red, warm but not dry, loud, active, headaches, night sweats Yang deficiency: cold, wet and oily, depressed, whispers, fatigue Yin excess: not cold but very moist, overweight, sluggish, mucus Yin deficiency: red, neutral to cool, very dry, underweight, panic, insomnia Hot: red, loud, inflamed (pain, redness), overactive, irritated Cold: pale, quiet, underactive, stuck, dull pain without redness Dry: dry skin, irritated eyes, dry cough, constipation, dry mouth Wet: puffiness (face, hands, tongue, feet), watery discharge, diarrhea</p>
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These are just general ideas, and almost always exist in combination in an individual (for instance, a yin-deficient person with insomnia might have signs of heat and dryness as well). Further, it seems that during both acute and chronic stress the symptoms of adrenal hormone dysfunction seem to manifest in the physiologic system that is weakest, evidenced in the person's history of illnesses. Fortunately, adaptogens are also well-known to possess an affinity to certain organs and tissues. In some cases, science can shed insight on these effects, such as with the high flavonoid content of hawthorn and its cardioprotective benefits; or ginseng saponins and their effect on the gastrointestinal system; or the neurotransmitter-modulating effects of the rosavins in *Rhodiola*. But generally, herbalists have known about the organ affinities of herbs for a long time, and while they are expressed in generalized terms ("the nervous system" vs. "the activity of serotonin in the central nervous system"), they are still quite useful.

Tulsi, Holy Basil (*Ocimum sanctum*)

Delicious as a tea or extract.

Energy: cool, well-balanced in moisture, somewhat yin-enhancing

Specifics: Inflammation in joints or muscles, autoimmune disease, rheumatism, mood imbalance, gastrointestinal spasm

Schizandra (*Schizandra chinensis*)

A powerful berry with a balanced energy profile and incredible taste. Use the extract.

Energy: almost perfectly balanced, tends towards moist

Specifics: hormonal disruption, liver disease and dysfunction, skin problems, urinary problems

Oats (*Avena sativa*)

Very safe and food-like, the medicinal parts are the unripe seedheads harvested at the 'milky' stage. Use tea or extract, the latter more indicated for acute nervous system symptoms.

Energy: moisturizing and somewhat warming, yin-enhancing

Specifics: drained, depleted, dry constitutions, nervous system disruption (depression, anxiety, shock, tremor, pain), menopause

Rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*)

Enlivening and energizing, provides spark and focus. Use an extract.

Energy: neutral to warm, somewhat drying, yang-balancing

Specifics: exhaustion, depression, reduced performance, anxiety, nonspecific pain, lack of focus and poor concentration

Korean Ginseng (*Panax ginseng*)

The best Yang tonic. Famous rejuvenator and sexual tonic, used as extract, capsule, or whole root.

Energy: warm, yang-enhancing

Specifics: progressive fatigue, sexual deficiency, low libido, depression, digestive disturbances, not for use w/ high blood pressure

American Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolium*)

An excellent Yin tonic. Most indicated for today's depleted culture.

Energy: neutral, yin-enhancing

Specifics: Fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, inflammation, digestive disturbances, immune deficiency with recurrent infection

Siberian Ginseng (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*)

Performance-enhancing, for athletes, students, or those undertaking demanding work. Capsules or extracts are good; a daily decoction is excellent too.

Energy: neutral to warm, somewhat yang-enhancing

Specifics: Fatigue, repeated stress before total exhaustion, caution w/ high blood pressure

Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*)

Tasty, moisturizing and powerfully anti-inflammatory. Can be taken in any form (as long as it contains the medicinal species).

Energy: moist and somewhat cooling, yin-enhancing

Specifics: Inflammation and pain, viral co-infection, irritated throat or GI tract, dryness, constipation. Use caution w/ high blood pressure and kidney disease.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somniferum*)

Ayurvedic “Indian Ginseng”. Extract or root powder traditionally mixed with warm milk.

Energy: slightly warming, well-balanced, yin-enhancing

Specifics: fatigue with insomnia, weakness and debility after protracted stress or illness.

Hawthorn (*Crataegus* species)

Berry, leaf or flower. The “May Queen” and a premier cardiovascular tonic.

Energy: warming, well-balanced.

Specifics: cardiovascular disease, depression, lack of focus and anxiety with palpitations, poor circulation

Medicinal Mushrooms (various species)

Mushrooms seem able to balance immune reactions that are complicating the deficiencies and disrupted stress responses that call for adaptogens. Some of my favorites are Red Reishi, especially if there are moist, inflamed allergic symptoms; and Cordyceps, for enhanced stamina and athletic performance.