

The Healing Properties of Dong Quai



Dong Quai, also known as danggui and *Angelica sinensis* has been used in China, Korea, and Japan for over one thousand years as a spice, tonic, and medicine. Part of the Apiaceae family, this herb is commonly used today in Traditional Chinese Medicine, often in combination with other herbs.¹ Dong Quai is sometimes referred to as the "female ginseng" and the dried root of the plant is frequently used to promote blood circulation and treat women's reproductive problems such as dysmenorrhea, painful menstruation and premenstrual symptoms, as well as other women's health issues including menopausal symptoms.²

There are conflicting views on the use of Dong Quai for treating menopause with some studies reporting that there has been no effect and others reporting positive effects particularly when used in combination with other herbs. A 2003 study reviewed the effect of *Angelica sinensis* and *Matricaria chamomilla* in a group of 55 postmenopausal women for the treatment of hot flashes during menopause over a 12-week period. The findings displayed a significant decrease in sleep disturbances, hot flashes and fatigue.³

In 2016, a study on the analgesic activity and effect of hemorheology in rats with blood stasis syndrome using *Angelica sinensis* and *Aurantii fructu* as a pair named Danggui-Zhiqiao herb-pair (DZHP), was carried out. Results of the study found that the essential oil of DZHP had good analgesic and promoting blood circulation activities, supporting its use to promote blood circulation in those with poor circulation and for treating blood stasis syndrome.⁴ It is believed that this blood circulation promoting activity is what helps Dong Quai to treat ovulation pain from blood stagnation. As a blood circulating herb, Dong Quai can be used to treat women with scanty menstruation and irregular or missed menstruation cycles.⁵

In fact, according to a 2006 study, an active ingredient in Dong Quai called Z-ligustilide was found to inhibit the contraction of an isolated rat uterus in a dose-dependent manner and helped to improve microcirculation. These findings suggest that Dong Quai may be an effective herb for antispasmodic activity and for relieving uterine contractions such as menstrual cramps during the menstrual cycle. These results have led to increased studies into the efficacy of ligustilide to help develop an effective drug for the prevention and treatment of primary dysmenorrhea.⁶ Ligustilide also has anti-inflammatory effects, which could contribute to the mechanisms of relief of menstrual symptoms.⁷

It's important to note that while north American herbalism may have pigeonholed Dong Quai as a woman's herb, this is an oversimplification of the Traditional Chinese Medicine concept that Dong Quai is one of the most yielding Yin tonics, however, Yin does not simply translate as woman, therefore Dong Quai can still be used by men.⁸



Medicinal Part of the Plant

The Dong Quai root provides the medicinal benefits for this plant. In Chinese medicine, it is believed that parts of the root vary in their actions and potential effects. The head of the root is known to produce anticoagulant activity, the bulk has tonic properties, and the tip of the root is useful for blood stagnation.⁹ The yellow-brown thick-branched roots of Dong Quai are used medicinally. The root is harvested and made into tablets, powders, and other medicinal forms. The Dong Quai root also contains several vitamins and minerals including vitamin A, carotenoids, vitamin E, vitamin C, vitamin B12,

biotin, folic acid, calcium and magnesium. It also contains 0.4% to 0.7% volatile oil.¹⁰ As was previously mentioned, the root also produces essential oils rich in ligustilide and ferulic acid – ingredients that have antispasmodic activities to help prevent blood clotting and relax the blood vessels.

Dosing

As with other herbal medicine, recommended dosage of Dong Quai is determined on an individual basis and is dependent upon an individual's symptoms and the method in which the herb is delivered. Currently, the capsulated herb form of Dong Quai is dosed at 500 to 600 mg tablets six times a day to help treat menopausal symptoms in women. For menopausal symptoms, the current recommended dosage stands at 4.5 g of powdered Dong Quai root daily, while the Dong Quai liquid tinctures – often more potent than their powdered or capsulated counterparts – have been found to be more potent, and therefore require a smaller dosage of 30 drops twice a day.

Active Mechanism

Contemporary research regarding the effects that Dong Quai has on estrogen levels have found conflicting evidence regarding the matter. This conflicting research is largely the result of the known effects that Dong Quai has on a person's physiology. Dong Quai extracts inhibit estradiol by binding to estrogen receptors and induce transcription activity in estrogen-responsive cells. However, the ferulic acid it contains is known to have estrogenic activity, and therefore lends credence to the belief that estrogen levels are effected by the intake of Dong Quai. What is known is that the Dong Quai extracts stimulate the proliferation of both estrogen-receptor positive and negative breast cancer cells in vitro.¹⁰

Side Effects

Although Dong Quai is viewed to be safe for many people, one of biggest contraindications of this herb is when taken with warfarin, it can increase the anticoagulant effects of warfarin and increase the risk of bleeding.¹⁰ Additionally, due to its stimulating effect on the uterus it should be avoided during pregnancy and during menstruation/for those with excessive flows as it could increase the blood flow.⁹ It should also be discontinued at least two weeks prior to surgery. Additionally, Dong Quai has estrogenic effects and might interfere with hormone replacement therapy, due to competition for estrogen receptors. Theoretically, Dong Quai might exacerbate estrogen-sensitive conditions. Women with these conditions including breast cancer, uterine cancer, ovarian cancer, endometriosis, and uterine fibroids should avoid using Dong Quai.¹⁰

References

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