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In This Issue

Phytoestrogenic
Herbs

Thanksgiving
with a Twist

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Phytoestrogenic Herbs

By Dr. Greg Sperber, BMBS, DAOM, LAc

“Phytoestrogens are plant constituents that possess either estrogenic or antiestrogenic activity.” (Pierson, 2003) The estrogenic activity of herbs is hotly debated both within and without our profession. This article will examine some of the issues involved with phytoestrogens, including whether they are real, and if so, do they have estrogenic effects; and, most importantly, how do they affect clinical situations?

Phytoestrogens fall into three major categories: isoflavones, the most potent, found in many legumes including soy; coumestans, found in sprouting plants; and lignans, found in flaxseed, lentils, fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and beans (Glazier & Bowman, 2001). The herbs and foods most often implicated with being estrogenic include *Trifolium pretense* (red clover), *Cimicifuga racemosa* (black cohosh, Sheng Ma), *Humulus lupulus* (hops), *Angelica sinensis* (dong quai, Dang Gui), *Glycyrrhiza glabra* (licorice, Gan Cao) (Pierson, 2003), *Vitex agnuscastus* (chasteberry), *Polygonum multiflorum* (fo-ti, Ye Jiao Teng) (Klein, Janfaza, Wong, Chang, 2003), *Panax ginseng* (Asian ginseng, Ren Shen), and *Panax quinquefolius* (North American ginseng, Xi Yang Shen) (Liu, Burdette, Xu, Gu, et al. 2001).

The evidence is pretty clear that many herbs and foods do

contain phytoestrogens and have estrogen-like activity in vitro. Red clover, chasteberry, and hops have been shown to have estrogen receptor activity and up-regulated several estrogen-inducible genes. Both Asian and North American ginseng up-regulated one gene but had no other activity. Both dang gui and licorice showed weak receptor activity and gene expression. And black cohosh showed no estrogen activity in any way. (Liu, et al. 2001). Another in vitro study (Klein, Janfaza, Wong, and Chang, 2003) concurred, showing high activity in soy, licorice, red clover, fo-ti, and hops; dang gui, black cohosh, and chasteberry did not have any activity.

Although several plants have been shown to have estrogenic activity and many studies show these effects in animals (Anthony, Clarkson, Bullock, Wagner, 1997; Anthony, Clarkson, Hughes, Morgan, et al., 1996; Wagner, Cefalu, Anthony, Litwak, et al. 1997; Hsieh, Santell, Haslam, Helferich, 1998; Lamartiniere, Moore, Holland, Barnes, 1995), the evidence is much sketchier in humans. There are three main issues in the use of phytoestrogens in humans: breast cancer prevention, the fear of inducing cancer in previous estrogen receptor positive cancer patients, and treating menopausal symptoms.



Thanksgiving is a time for sharing food and joy with family and friends. Traditional recipes with a TCM twist will help people understand how to incorporate Eastern remedies into Western holidays.

THANKSGIVING WITH A TWIST

Hawthorn Sauce

1/2 pound dried Hawthorn Berries (*shan zha*)

6 cups water

10-12 tablespoons sugar

Soak the *shan zha* in water for 15 minutes. Drain and rinse. Soak for another 15 minutes. Drain well.

Bring 6 cups water to a boil, then add the berries. Cook for 15 minutes at medium heat,

stirring every so often. Add sugar. Turn heat down to a simmer and cover, stirring occasionally. Cook for another 15 minutes. Taste for sweetness and add sugar if needed, incorporating it into the sauce. Remove from heat. Let cool and thicken to a delicious sauce.

Serve as you would cranberry sauce or gravy. Serves 4-6.

Whether or not phytoestrogens aid breast cancer prevention in humans is hampered by low powered studies. A meta-analysis (Glazier & Bowman, 2001) determined that there is insufficient evidence for supporting their use in prevention.

Since phytoestrogens have very similar structures to endogenous estrogens, there has been a significant fear in the medical community that they may hamper recovery or cause a relapse in estrogen receptor positive breast cancer patients. Doctors frequently recommend that their cancer patients avoid herbs which contain phytoestrogens. The evidence, however, is inconclusive (Glazier & Bowman, 2001). Some studies show induction of cancer while others show possible protection. The evidence is not conclusive either way.

Menopausal symptom relief is another common use of phytoestrogens. A Cochrane Library meta-analysis (Lethaby, Marjoribanks, Kronenberg, Roberts, et al., 2007) showed mixed results in humans with some low powered studies showing positive effects, but large studies showing no effects. Their conclusions were that there is no evidence supporting the use of phytoestrogens to treat menopausal symptoms. However, the analysis only looked at the use of red clover. Another study looking at the use of dang gui in post-menopausal women

showed similar non-effect. (Hirata, Small, Swiersz, Ettinger, et al., 1997) And finally, another meta-analysis came to a similar conclusion looking at studies involving black cohosh, red clover, dang gui, and ginseng. (Huntley & Ernst, 2003)

In summary, most meta-analyses show little to no evidence of estrogenic activity in humans and recommend further study. It is probably best to avoid phytoestrogenic herbs in recovering estrogen receptor positive breast cancer patients. However, many of the herbs, such as dang gui, have not shown strong estrogenic activity either in vitro or in vivo.

Dr. Greg Sperber is the author of *Integrated Pharmacology, Combining Modern Pharmacology with Chinese Medicine* published by Blue Poppy. He received a masters and doctor of acupuncture and Oriental medicine from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, San Diego and a medical degree from Flinders University of South Australia, and a master of business administration from National University. Currently he is a professor and Director of Clinical Services and Clinical Chair at PCOM and the immediate past president of the California State Oriental Medical Association. He also speaks internationally about acupuncture business concerns and drug-herb interactions.

Thanksgiving with a Twist



Contact us to order ingredient packets!

Something we love to do here at nuherbs is to talk about food and try new recipes. With the holiday season right around the corner, we took out our pots and pans and tweaked some traditional Thanksgiving recipes to bring some Chinese herbs and flavors to the table.

We recommend Organic, Free-Range, Grass-Fed ingredients where appropriate.

Job's Tear Stuffing with Walnuts and Red Dates

- 1/4 cup butter (1/2 stick)
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 small garlic clove, minced
- 3 1/2 cups low-salt chicken broth
- 2 cups *yi yi ren* (about 1 pound bag)
- 1 cup *hong zao*, chopped, rinsed and pitted
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
- 1 cup walnuts (*hu tao ren*), coarsely chopped
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions

Melt butter in a large heavy pot over medium-high heat. Add onions and garlic and sauté until tender, approximately 4 minutes. Add chicken broth and bring to a boil. Add the job's tear, reduce to medium-low and allow to simmer, covered, for about 30 minutes or until most liquid is absorbed.

Add the the red date, parsley and thyme into the *yi yi ren*. Cover and cook until liquid is absorbed, approximately 5 more minutes. Then stir in the walnuts and green onions. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter a 9 inch square baking dish (or its size-equivalent). Transfer the stuffing evenly into the dish before covering with a buttered piece of

foil, buttered-side down. Bake until heated through, about 40 minutes. Serves 6-8 generously.

Hawthorn and Schisandra Turkey Brine

For a 14-16 pound turkey.

- 1 cup Kosher salt
- 1 cup *wu wei zi*
- 10 pieces *chen pi*
- 1 tablespoon *ding xiang*
- 6 pieces *ba jiao*
- 1/2 cup *shan zha*
- 1/2 cup light brown sugar (optional)
- 1/2 stick unsalted butter
- 5 quarts water

Try to remove the seeds from the *shan za*. Rinse all of the herbs and drain well. In a coffee grinder or other powerful processor, grind all ingredients together, in batches if necessary.

In a large saucepan over high heat, combine the brine mixture with the water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, stirring often, until the brine dissolves, about 5 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat and allow the brine mixture cool to room temperature.

Rinse the turkey inside and out with cold water and place in a large brining bag. Carefully pour the brine mixture into the bag. Seal the bag, pressing out the air, and place in a large stockpot or other container large enough to hold the turkey. Refrigerate for 24 to 36 hours, turning occasionally.

Carefully remove the turkey from the brine and discard the liquid. Rinse the turkey inside and out with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Trim off and discard the excess fat. Place the turkey, breast side up,

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on a rack in a large roasting pan. Rub the skin evenly with the butter. Truss the turkey using kitchen twine. Let the turkey stand at room temperature for 1 hour.

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 400°F. If you would like to add aromatics such as sage, rosemary, apple, onions and cinnamon to the turkey cavity, do so now.

Roast the turkey for 30 minutes at 400°F. Reduce the oven temperature to 325°F and continue roasting, basting every 30 minutes with the pan juices. If the breast begins to cook too quickly, tent it loosely with aluminum foil. After about 2 hours of total roasting time, begin testing for doneness by inserting an instant-read thermometer into the thickest part of the breast and thigh, away from the bone. The breast should register 165°F and the thigh, 175°F. Total roasting time should be 3 to 4 hours.

Transfer the turkey to a carving board, cover loosely with foil and let rest for 20 to 30 minutes before carving. Serves 12 to 14.

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