

The Quest For Herbal Energy

There are many herbal-based energy products on the market making claims about boosting metabolism and athletic performance. Buyer beware - some herbal "energy" products have been misused to the point of causing bodily harm and even death.

These energy products may use traditional herbs, but they are not formulated to treat medical conditions. However, traditional herbal strategies can explain how these products affect the body. There are two main strategies that come into play when we are talking about the herbs used in these types of supplements: 1. some nourish or add fuel to the body and; 2. some stimulate or move the energy that already exists in the body.

Consider a campfire - you can control the flames by how much wood or fuel you use, and how much air can get to the flames. If the intent is to "whip up" the fire - or energy - the fastest way to do this is by fanning of the flames or, in other words, pure stimulation. The strongest way to do this in the body is through the use of amphetamines or "speed." Amphetamines greatly increases heart rate, blood flow and burns fuel quickly. This is known to help people lose weight, but can be dangerous to the body.

Just because a stimulant is herbal based does not make it any safer than chemical amphetamines. Many herbal diet and energy pills are an inappropriate mix of natural herbal stimulants that intensify the stimulating quality. These pills are simply designed to create an herbal equivalent of an amphetamine.

Natural sources of caffeine, aspirin, ephedra and pseudoephedrine may not be as strong

as amphetamines, or methamphetamines, by themselves. But under the right conditions - such as overdose, dehydration, heart conditions, medication interaction, etc. - they can be just as dangerous.

Legal, natural stimulants can be used safely, but athletes should be aware of the strategy behind their use. They rev up the system, but do not necessarily give you more energy, stamina or power. They only make you feel more "revved up."

The aforementioned second strategy is to nourish the body, or to provide fuel for the fire. Increasing your intake of carbohydrates and proteins is a sensible choice to accomplish this. Those who want a quick boost often turn to ginseng, cordyceps, dang gui, royal jelly, and a host of other exotic herbal products.

Strategy-wise, the use of nourishing herbs rarely corrects the underlying cause of low energy. Nourishing herbs, especially ginseng, were traditionally understood as a bandage or a crutch - something to help the body function until a time when they were no longer needed. The classic use of ginseng was for the elderly, especially when a weak person needed to use herbs that were too difficult to digest. Ginseng provided a way to boost up the body temporarily, making it possible for the important herbs to do their job.

The downside to all nourishing foods and herbs is that they can weigh down the system, similar to smothering a small fire with a big log, or overeating at a big holiday meal. Too much fuel slows down the system and makes the body feel sluggish. There are



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several strategies to deal with this type of sluggishness. Your activity level can be increased to burn off the fuel; spices or stimulants can also help; or you can better moderate the energy (i.e. food) you consume in the first place.

Many of the popular "energy" drinks follow the idea of overloading a fast burn fuel (sugar and ginseng et. al.) along with a stimulant (caffeine) to fan the fire. Traditional cooking often follows this concept as well. Heavy meats and rich desserts are often matched with spices specifically to "lighten" how these foods feel in the body.

Overuse of these energy drinks, or just sugar and caffeine in general, can be hard on the body. They tend to be like gasoline to a fire. These quick energy hits tend to raise energy quickly, leading to a crash of energy later. This can lead to dependency, as another quick hit of energy is often desired in order to recover from the energy crash. Many people find they eventually cannot function unless they have a constant flow of caffeine and sugar.

In traditional herbal medicine, the overuse of sweet was seen to increase certain types of joint pain. Our modern culture uses an unprecedented amount of sugar. Too much sugar over a long period of time, like all nourishing foods, can make you feel sluggish and heavy. It can even lead to increased joint pain.

A martial artist or athlete must understand their own body and how to achieve the performance level they desire. In general, you will see better performance when you eat

a healthy diet that provides a balanced amount of energy sufficient to sustain you through your regular activity. Reliance on various "energy" supplements should be avoided or left to those extreme situations where you need them to get by until you can get back to your regular routine. Try to understand the strategy behind the supplements you are using. If you need a strong dose of stimulant-type herbs to avoid feeling sluggish after meals, then you may be overloading on "fuel." Your body will function best when you properly match the fuel to the fire.

Common stimulant herbs:

ma huang/ ephedra
zhi shi/ bitter orange/ citrus aurantium
betel/areca
guarana/ paullinia cupana
Yohimbe/quebracho
green tea
cascara sagrada

Common nourishing herbs:

Ginseng/ (all forms)
huang qi/ astragalus
dang gui/ angelic sinensis
shu di huang/ rhemannia
royal jelly/ bee pollen
Algae
gan cao/ licorice
heshouwu/polygonum multiflorum/foti
animal parts, particularly deer
dong chong xia cao/ cordyceps
yin yang huo/ epimedium/ horny goat
jiao gu lan/panta/ gynostemma



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