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Adaptogens: A Wellness Craze or a Faithful Health Tool?



By Jenny Menzel, H.C.
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Reviewed by Bill Rawls, MD
Medical Director of Vital Plan

If you've found your way to this article, you're probably no stranger to the world of holistic health and have heard the term "[adaptogen](#)" at some point, along with praise for its power to help people cope with [stress](#). But what are adaptogens, and do they actually combat stress? Plus, is the driving demand for them just a craze — or do they play a role in achieving better health?

Read on to learn:

- How adaptogens were discovered
- What qualifies as an adaptogen
- The effects of adaptogens on cellular health
- Top recommended adaptogens to try
- Which herbs to pair for maximum benefits

Why Are They Called Adaptogens?

While [ancient medical systems](#), such as Ayurveda from India, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) from China, and other cultural medicine systems, have been **using adaptogenic plants for roughly 5,000 years**, it wasn't until the 1940s when the term "adaptogen" was coined by Russian scientist [Nikolay V. Lazarev](#) to categorize a unique set of stress-resisting herbs. True to its roots in the Latin word *adaptare*, which means to adjust or modify, adaptogens help us adjust to stress by protecting the cells throughout our body.

What Qualifies as an Adaptogen?

"There were originally [three](#) criteria that defined a plant or herb as an adaptogen," says Dr. Bill Rawls, MD, medical director of Vital Plan.

A natural substance is considered an adaptogen if:

1. **It counters stress.** Adaptogenic herbs protect against the damage of daily factors like environmental toxins, chemicals, infection, and mental or physical stress.
2. **It creates homeostasis through nonspecific action.** Natural adaptogens have nonspecific actions that reduce the impact of stress without side effects, whereas [synthetic drugs](#) aim to reduce symptoms of illness through targeted measures that can produce side effects.
3. **It has a low potential for toxicity.** When taken in daily therapeutic doses, adaptogens don't produce toxicity in the body.

Additionally, a [fourth criterion](#) has emerged that distinguishes adaptogens from other herbs. **Adaptogens are unique because they directly affect the central hormone pathways of the neuroendocrine system that balance the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA axis), a major component involved in creating homeostasis.**

How Adaptogens Protect Cellular Health

All adaptogens offer immense health benefits at a cellular level. **"We are a complex collection of cells, and whether it's your heart beating, your liver functioning, or your [thyroid gland](#) working — it's all cellular functions,"** explains Dr. Rawls.

But daily encounters with free radicals, toxic substances, radiation, unhealthy foods, and microbes (viruses, bacteria, fungi) chronically stress our cells, says Dr. Rawls. If cellular stress goes unchecked long enough, both [symptoms and disease may develop](#). Enter adaptogenic herbs. **"All adaptogenic herbs help protect our cells against these types of assaults,"** he explains.

Even when we experience healthy stress like physical exercise, the body goes through a process known as [general adaptation syndrome \(GAS\)](#), which has a three-stage response:

1. **Alarm:** The first phase of GAS is the initial shock, or alarm. Examples of alarm include when you feel your stomach drop, your hands tremble, or your heart beats faster after you become stressed.
2. **Resistance:** This stage occurs when your body tries to recover from the initial shock. If the stress passes, your stress-related symptoms dissipate, and your body returns to normal. If stress remains, chronic responses may develop, such as headaches, sleeplessness, or appetite changes.
3. **Exhaustion:** When the stress is ongoing, the exhaustion phase sets in and may give way to more significant health complaints that disrupt everyday life.

During a pressure-filled event, the adrenal glands respond by producing the hormone [cortisol](#), which initially provides the resistance to stress we need to carry us through the situation. As stress persists, however, cortisol surges can bring us to the exhaustion stage and break down our tissues, eventually **leading to widespread inflammation and pain, damaging our cells and dysregulating the HPA axis.**

But here's where adaptogens really shine — consistently taking them improves our tolerance to stress by helping us stay in the resistance phase longer without leading to exhaustion. By keeping communications between cells and the HPA axis strong, we set our bodies up for optimal repair.



Although you might see a variety of herbs labeled as “adaptogens,” not every herb counteracts stress and facilitates the HPA-axis balance. Adaptogens also balance and protect cells, but **they’re most effective when used on a routine basis as they have cumulative effects.** To help you understand where to begin, check out these six adaptogen recommendations:

6 Adaptogens for Stress Support and Balance



Rhodiola

Considered one of Rawls’ favorite adaptogens, [Rhodiola rosea](#) is a well-studied herb known for its impressive ability to protect against a vast range of **mental and physical stressors**. For instance, one [study](#) found that rhodiola minimized high-altitude sickness due to its ability to oxygenate the tissue.



Ashwagandha

India native *Withania somnifera*, more commonly called [ashwagandha](#), is a time-tested revitalizer that regulates mood and sleep cycles by influencing the HPA axis. It’s also used to recover from exercise. It helps support muscle strength and reduced muscle strain, according to a [study](#) published in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Medicine*.



Panax Ginseng

Arguably the most widely used and [researched](#) adaptogens, *Panax ginseng* has been shown to modulate signaling in cell pathways, increase blood circulation, boost antioxidants, lower blood pressure, and improve overall cardiac function. The name *Panax* means “all healing,” so it’s no wonder it tops the charts of important adaptogens.



Eleuthero

Also known as Siberian ginseng, [Eleutherococcus senticosus](#) isn’t actually part of the ginseng family, as it has different active chemicals. An invigorating herb, eleuthero is a true adaptogen that supports physical vitality, relieves mental strain, and builds resilience to physical stress. One [study](#) found that consuming 800 mg daily for eight weeks increased endurance time by 23% and enhanced oxygenation by 12% in recreational (non-competitive) males.



Reishi

A prominent medicinal mushroom, [reishi](#) is perhaps best known for its [immune-protective](#) qualities, but the “elixir of life” also protects the liver,

kidneys, cardiovascular system, and supports the adrenals in times of stress. What's more, reishi acts on the nervous system to reduce nervousness and promote more restful [sleep](#).



Shilajit

Primarily found in the Himalayan mountains, [shilajit](#) is not an herb in the strict sense of the word but a by-product of fermentation with soil bacteria. High in humic and fulvic acid, this herbomineral not only offers cell protection, but it also has immense benefits to gut health, fertility, and immunity. As an adaptogen, it stabilizes the HPA axis and preserves mitochondrial function.

Pair Your Adaptogens to Create Synergy

"People tend to look at one adaptogen and think they'll take it and experience its benefits, but **all herbs work best when they [synergize with other herbs](#)**," says Dr. Rawls. Here are other herbs to consider taking daily with adaptogens that have cross coverage, provide complimentary benefits, and have a high safety profile.



Turmeric

Famous for its anti-inflammatory effects, [turmeric](#) can help cut through brain fog, cool inflamed joints, enhance digestion, and clear the skin on top of inhibiting infections.



Gotu Kola

Another herb widely used in ancient medicine, [gotu kola](#) is best known for improving cognitive function by boosting blood circulation in the brain and throughout the body. The herb may also help brighten skin and strengthen immunity.



Hawthorn

Best known for its heart benefits, [hawthorn](#) also supports the cardiovascular, digestive, and nervous systems and connective tissues with its anti-inflammatory properties and high antioxidant profile.



Pine Bark Extract

High in antioxidants, [pine bark extract](#) is best used to strengthen skin, joints, tendons, and ligaments. It's also good for toning the cardiovascular system, which contributes to strong veins and arteries needed for a healthy heart.



Milk Thistle

A top go-to for detoxing the liver, [milk thistle](#) also promotes healthy bile flow to support cells in the digestive tract and protects the kidneys by regenerating the kidney cells.

Ginkgo

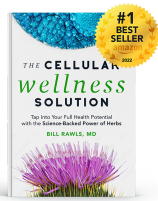


Known as a memory tonic, [ginkgo biloba](#) (often shortened to ginkgo) targets cellular repair in the brain and eyes while increasing blood flow throughout the body, making it a top choice for boosting circulation and brainpower.

Fad or Fixture?

So, are adaptogens just another fad? Without a doubt, adaptogens have faithfully stood the test of time and will likely continue to as science uncovers the true nature of their inner workings for stress reduction and how they foster better cellular health.

“Modern drugs artificially dampen symptoms and do nothing to counteract cellular stress,” states Rawls. **“I want to get people thinking of adaptogens and herbs not just to solve an acute problem but to build a foundation for health to protect against illness and practice self-care at the cellular level.”**



Discover more in **Dr. Bill Rawls' new #1 Bestselling book: [The Cellular Wellness Solution](#): Tap Into Your Full Health Potential with the Science-Backed Power of Herbs.**

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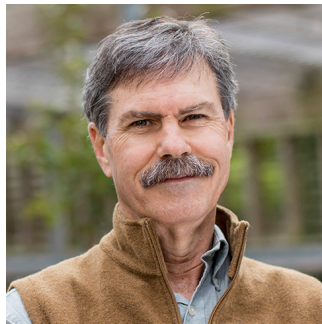
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ABOUT THE MEDICAL DIRECTOR

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Dr. Rawls is a licensed medical doctor in North Carolina and a leading expert in integrative health. He has extensive training in alternative therapies, and is the Medical Director of Vital Plan, a holistic health and herbal supplement company in Raleigh, NC.

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