Ginkgo biloba, an Extract for Alzheimer’s Disease

Latest news has it that a cure for early stage Alzheimer disease may just be in a tree called Ginkgo biloba (銀杏, 傳稱白果).

‘Ginkgo Biloba Extract’ [G.B.E] is an extract from the leaf of the Ginkgo biloba tree. The tree is reputedly the world’s oldest living, a species whose existence can be traced back over 200 million years, and is often referred to as a “living fossil”. Individual trees are said to live for as long as 1,000 years. Ancient Chinese medicine first used G.B.E to treat ailments of the brain and respiratory tract.

Now, the Journal of the American Medical Association has reported in its October 22 issue, that 27% of Alzheimer patients from a sample of 300 patients showed improvements in their mental functioning, including reasoning, short-term memory and learning ability, after taking the Ginkgo extract for six months, compared to only 14% who were on placebo.

According to Mr. Wu Zhiming, Secretary to the Hong Kong Association for Chinese Medicine, the extract is generally used for asthmatic problems and to ‘moisturize’ dry lungs. Based on traditional Chinese medicine, decreasing mental power which is a symptom of Alzheimer’s disease, is caused by a deficiency in the kidneys. Ginkgo biloba helps to regulate the flow of blood and vital energies in the body that uplift the kidneys, thereby, improving mental power as well. Other commonly prescribed drugs used in Chinese medicine for Alzheimer’s disease are Eucommia and the Alpinia fruit.

Ginkgo does not seem to be a new discovery in the west, the standardized leaf extract is well-researched and widely used in Europe. In Germany, Ginkgo extract has been in use for three primary clinical applications in geriatric medicine: dementia syndrome; distance and pain-free walking [cramping in the legs caused by poor circulation]; and ringing in the ears. Another common geriatric use is in restoring a sense of taste to improve appetite in the aged. Modern clinical use focuses on Ginkgo Biloba’s positive effect on circulation and as an ‘anti-aging’ antioxidant.

The contents in G.B.E. that makes it a natural cure for neural and brain deficiencies – terpenes, flavonoids, proanthocyanidins and Ginkgo Heterosides [flavoglycosides] — revitalize the circulatory and nervous system, that includes arteries, capillaries, veins and heart in the human body. By improving neural transmission, G.B.E improves mental functions in elderly patients displaying signs of senility. Its curative effects include energy enhancement, increase of cellular glucose intake, and inhibition of platelet aggregation.

G.B.E. is said to promote radical scavenging activity; increase blood flow to the brain; and improves transmission of nerve signals. Patients suffering from chronic cerebral arterial insufficiency and/or peripheral arterial insufficiency responded favorably to the extract. Future experiments may indicate that G.B.E. is of benefit as a vasodilator in cases of angina; as an inotropic agent in congestive heart failure; and as a mood-elevating substance in depression.

In view of the media frenzy that has surrounded the wonder extract recently, a major manufacturer of Ginkgo biloba extract in America has advised that consumers select a standardized Ginkgo biloba leaf extract product, and not a product containing the whole leaf of Ginkgo biloba. The standardized leaf extract allows manufacturers to control the concentration and consistency of Ginkgo in each capsule, thus providing maximum potency. On the other hand, whole-leaf Ginkgo biloba products are likely to have a varied consistency and may be less effective. Purchase a Ginkgo biloba product that contains at least 24% Ginkgo flavonone glycosides as well as terpenlactones. This is the form and level that has been clinically tested for safety and efficacy.