

GINGER

What Is It?

Revered around the world for its pungent taste, ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) is a natural spice that is also widely prized for its medicinal properties. Since ancient times, traditional healers in a diverse array of cultures have used this plant primarily to help settle upset stomachs. Chinese herbalists have relied on ginger as a medicine and flavoring for more than 2,500 years. The early Greeks mixed it into breads (hence the first gingerbread), and North American colonists sipped nausea-quelling ginger beer, the precursor of modern ginger ale. Today, many cultures continue to rely on ginger for controlling nausea and also for reducing inflammation.

Health Benefits

Ginger's effectiveness as a digestive aid is due largely to its active ingredients: gingerols and shogaols. These substances help to neutralize stomach acids, enhance the secretion of digestive juices (stimulating the appetite), and tone the muscles of the digestive tract. Research confirms the presence of anti-inflammatory properties in ginger as well.

- ❑ **Relieve nausea.** Standard anti-nausea medications often work through the central nervous system, causing drowsiness. Ginger isn't likely to cause this reaction, however, because it acts directly on the digestive tract. In studies of women undergoing major gynecological or exploratory (laparoscopic) surgery, those who took 1 gram of ginger before the procedure experienced significantly less postoperative reaction to anesthesia and surgery--namely, nausea and vomiting--than did those who were given a placebo. Ginger also may be useful in easing the nausea that frequently follows chemotherapy treatments.
- ❑ **Combat motion sickness.** In a widely cited study of Danish naval cadets, those given 1 gram of powdered ginger daily had much fewer incidents of cold sweats and vomiting (classic symptoms of seasickness) than did those given a placebo. A number of other studies have demonstrated similar findings concerning ginger's calming effect on motion sickness.
- ❑ **Reduce dizziness.** Ginger's anti-nausea action also helps dispel dizziness, particularly when the dizziness is aggravated by motion sickness. Older people, who can be unsteady on their feet, may particularly benefit from ginger's steadying influence.
- ❑ **Limit flatulence.** Because ginger soothes the digestive tract, it can be useful in relieving flatulence. Supplements or freshly grated ginger root mixed with diluted lime juice work well for this purpose.
- ❑ **Control chronic pain.** Ginger helps indirectly to relieve chronic pain by reducing inflammation and, particularly when taken in standardized extract form, by lowering the body's level of natural pain-causing compounds called prostaglandins. Localized chronic pain may also respond well to ginger oil massages.
- ❑ **Ease the pain of muscle aches and rheumatoid arthritis.** Ginger oil massaged into sore or aching muscles offers a measure of relief from muscle strain, in part because of the herb's anti-inflammatory properties. When taken in standardized extract form, ginger may additionally lower the level of the body's natural pain-causing compounds called prostaglandins. Rheumatoid arthritis symptoms may also respond to treatment with ginger, either in massage oil or standardized extract form. In a study of seven women with rheumatoid arthritis, reduced joint swelling and pain were reported following a daily regimen of up to 1 gram of powdered ginger or 5 to 50 grams of fresh ginger.
- ❑ **Minimize symptoms of the common cold, allergies, and other respiratory conditions.** Ginger is a natural antihistamine and decongestant. It seems to provide a measure of relief from cold and allergy symptoms by dilating constricted bronchial tubes. It's often included in herbal decongestant blends that are designed for sinusitis and other respiratory complaints.

Dosage Information

- For motion sickness:** Take 100 mg two hours before departing and then every four hours afterward as needed.
- For aching muscles:** Add a few drops of ginger oil to 1 tablespoon of a neutral oil (such as almond oil), blend well, then rub the mixture into the painful area.
- For rheumatoid arthritis:** Take 100 mg three times a day or drink up to four cups of ginger tea daily.
- For chronic pain:** Either take 100 mg three times daily or blend a few drops of ginger, lavender, and birch oils with 1 tablespoon of a neutral oil (such as almond oil), and gently massage the mixture into the affected areas.
- For cold and allergy relief:** Drink up to four cups of ginger tea daily as needed. Folk practitioners also recommend chewing fresh ginger, drinking real ginger ale, or squeezing juice from a fresh ginger root and mixing it with a spoonful of honey.

Possible Side Effects

Don't treat pregnancy-related nausea with ginger for longer than the first two months of pregnancy. Similarly, don't take more than 250 mg four times a day during pregnancy without consulting your obstetrician. ☒ Avoid medicinal amounts of ginger if you have gallstones unless your doctor advises you otherwise; the herb increases bile flow. ☒ Because ginger can make blood platelets less sticky--and thus increase the risk for bleeding--it's probably a good precautionary measure to stop taking ginger three to four days before any scheduled surgery. Start up again right after surgery.