Ginkgo, the Brain Herb

Katherine M. Birkner, C.R.N.A., Ph.D., C.N.C.

Past to Present

How old is the tree known as Ginkgo Biloba? It's so old that Ginkgo leaf extract has been used in Chinese medicine for at least 5,000 years. In fact, the Ginkgo is the world's oldest living species of tree. Also known as the Maidenhair tree, Ginkgo was thriving during the Age of Dinosaurs, some 250 million years ago.

Its leaves are fan-shaped, smooth and tough, and about four inches long, turning from green to yellow in autumn. The trees themselves grow to about 100 feet high, bear an inedible fruit with an ivory-colored inner seed which resembles an almond, and live as long as 1,000 years or more. Although these seeds are sweet and edible, it is the leaves that have proven to possess health-enhancing qualities.

The Ginkgo Biloba tree is remarkably resilient to insects, disease and pollution, which accounts for its survival through the ages. Today because of this, the tree is a popular addition to major boulevards, parks and streets in the U.S. Plantations are now flourishing in France, Japan and South Korea, where Ginkgo trees are specifically grown for pharmaceutical purposes.

Because of the Ginkgo Biloba's ability to preserve and prolong its existence under the most adverse conditions, it is possible there is a link between its survival and the health secrets man has uncovered within its leaves.

Capturing the Extract

For centuries, man has used a tried-and-tested method of extracting the magic of the Ginkgo tree. Thanks to today's sophisticated techniques of chemical analysis, biomedical detective are able to identify and track where they have the most beneficial impact on the human body.

The first step in producing the Ginkgo Biloba Extract is completed when the leaves are harvested in the fall, just as they begin to turn from green to yellow. After the leaves are harvested, they are dried in hothouses or warehouses where the air temperature is specifically controlled. The dried leaves are then raked, to separate twigs, branches, stalks and any other foreign matter that is unnecessary and may interfere with the final extract. They are pressed into bales, kept under a constant temperature and humidity to avoid moisture uptake and fermentation and then shipped off to an extraction plant.

Different cultures have perfected their own extraction techniques, and some of these processes are closely guarded secrets. But essentially, the Ginkgo leaves are pulverized and mixed with organic solvents that liberate the chemical components of the leaves. The process is repeated a number of times to ensure purity. The crude extract is then further refined to a point where the flavonoids make up a precise twenty-four percent concentration of the mixture. This has been proven over the years and through recent laboratory studies to provide the optimum therapeutic effects of Ginkgo.

Powerful Benefits Experience

The power of Ginkgo Biloba Extract takes on new dimensions when we consider what its natural ingredients - flavonoids glycosides and ginkgolides - are able to achieve when working together.

Of the many clinical studies performed on Ginkgo Biloba, the beneficial effects experienced are remarkable. Numerous studies involving hundreds of geriatric patients with chronic cerebral insufficiency concluded with a substantial regression of the major symptoms, including vertigo, headache, tinnitus, senility, depression, fatigue, lack of vigilance, and poor circulation of the limbs. Researchers note that it appears that Ginkgo Biloba, by increasing cerebral blood flow and thus oxygen and glucose

utilization, provides relief from any of the side effects of aging.

Ginkgo shows great promise as a brain stimulant that may not only have the ability to protect, but also to turn back the years for those who have already fallen victim to the ravages of time. It has even been indicated in a number of studies to effectively prevent deterioration in patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

In study after study, Ginkgo Biloba's ability to prevent platelet aggregation and clotting has been born out. It appears certain that the beneficial effects of Ginkgo are the results of its ability to increase arterial tone, retard blood cell clumping, and reduce inflammation of blood vessel walls.

At the cellular level, Ginkgo's antioxidant effects are potent, and are attributed mainly to the flavonoids present in the extract. Antioxidants are beneficial because they protect the membranes of the red blood cells, thereby preventing their destruction. In addition, antioxidants destroy free-roaming oxygen molecules that can cause hardening of the arteries, cancer, and most of the degenerative diseases. With its potent antioxidant powers and proven anti- inflammatory abilities, Ginkgo traps, neutralizes, and eliminates free radicals before they have a chance to create havoc.

Other disorders medical scientists have successfully treated with Ginkgo Biloba are diseases of the eye, ear and heart, asthma, graft rejection, and other immune disorders like toxic shock syndrome. Extensive testing of Ginkgo extracts has confirmed Ginkgo's ability to increase blood flow to limbs and the brain, including areas of microcirculation in small capillaries.

Ginkgo Biloba is a good example of our need to preserve all plant species. Many plants may contain unique chemical compounds that we do not yet know how to use for the benefit of mankind.

Millions of people today can benefit from Ginkgo, the living fossil, which has been around for so many million of years. Ginkgo extracts from the leaves of this ancient tree can provide people with much needed healing relief.

CAUTION: Diabetics should use only under a physician's supervision. Do not use Ginkgo Biloba if pregnant or lactating.

This article is not intended to give medical advice or replace the services of a physician. It is for educational purposes only.