

Jiaogulan

Gynostemma pentaphyllum



Jiaogulan (*Gynostemma pentaphyllum*) is a climbing vine, akin to the cucumber, that is found in China and other Asian nations. It is thought to have healing properties and is used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

Also known as Southern ginseng, jiaogulan contains a saponin compound called gypenoside, as well as other plant compounds. The herb is sold as a tea, powder, or capsule, for health conditions that include diabetes, high cholesterol, and anxiety.

What Is Jiaogulan Used For?

Despite the herb's long history of use in TCM, it is still hard to find definitive research to support its medical use in humans. What does exist is limited to laboratory studies and small clinical trials, many of which continue to be done in mice and other animals.

Diabetes, obesity, and stress are the uses with the most notable research behind them. Other studies have looked at the herb's role in various cancers and in preventing liver damage.

Diabetes

Studies suggest jiaogulan may help prevent or control diabetes. They begin with a small clinical trial published in 2010, which found the herb taken as a tea may lower blood sugar levels in people with type 2 diabetes.¹

After 12 weeks of treatments, this study of 24 people found that those who got jiaogulan showed more improvement in blood sugar levels and response to insulin than those who did not get the treatment.



Similar studies from the same investigators followed in the next few years. In one, wild jiaogulan was harvested in northern Vietnam for a small group of 16 people who were newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. In the study, which spanned 10 months, some were given jiaogulan tea while the control group received green tea. The jiaogulan was found to improve the response to insulin.²

More recent studies of jiaogulan's role in diabetes focus on animal groups. They include a 2019 study on mice that again found benefits for preventing and treating diabetes, with fasting blood sugar levels that decreased when they were fed a jiaogulan extract.³

While jiaogulan shows potential for treating type 2 diabetes in conjunction with other medicine, more research is needed before it can be recommended. In the meantime, scientists continue to identify more compounds in jiaogulan to better understand the overall health benefits. So far they have found more than 200 of them.



Obesity

Jiaogulan may have anti-obesity effects, according to a 2021 study published in the Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics.⁴

Australia-based researchers gave either 450 milligrams (mg) of the herbal extract or a sham treatment (placebo) to 117 overweight men and women. They monitored their progress for 16 weeks.

At the end of the study, the jiaogulan group showed a significant reduction in total body weight, body mass index (BMI), and total fat mass when compared to the placebo group.

The scientists say their work supports earlier studies that found weight loss benefits for people taking the herb. It extends the benefits to include people at lower levels of obesity too.

Previous animal studies also have shown benefits in treating metabolic syndrome. It is a combination of symptoms and cardiac risk factors that result from obesity-related insulin resistance.



Stress

Jiaogulan is one of many medicinal herbs, or adaptogens, that are thought to relieve stress.

A 2019 study in South Korea looked at 72 people with a history of chronic stress and anxiety.⁵ Half of them were given an extract made from jiaogulan leaves, while the others received a placebo. They continued taking the supplement for eight weeks while they were routinely assessed for stress.

The authors found lower stress levels in the jiaogulan group, but said additional studies are needed to explore this further.

Recap

Jiaogulan has long been used in traditional Chinese medicine. Scientists still are working to verify its health benefits. Research indicates it may be helpful in managing blood sugar levels, weight, and stress, but more evidence is needed before jiaogulan can be recommended.

Possible Side Effects

Jiaogulan is generally thought of as safe, though it may cause side effects. These may include nausea and an increase in bowel movements.

There are, however, notable concerns for some people with specific health problems:

- Jiaogulan may have an impact on the immune system. People with diseases such as lupus, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis should avoid using the herb until more research is done.
- Jiaogulan may suppress blood clotting and cause harm to people who have blood conditions, take blood-thinning drugs, or plan to undergo surgery.
- Despite any benefits for people with diabetes, those who are taking insulin or other blood-sugar drugs should use jiaogulan with caution. It may lead to low blood sugar levels.
- The herb's safety in pregnant or nursing women is not proven. It should not be used by women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.
- Jiaogulan can cause mild stomach discomfort when taken on empty stomach

- Other side effects may include: fatigue, dizziness, mild fever, sweating, sore throat, tachycardia and tachypnea.

Speak to your doctor before using jiaogulan. Be sure to mention any other drugs, supplements, and herbs you are taking.

Selection, Preparation, and Storage

Jiaogulan teas, powders, and capsules are sold in many natural-foods stores. They also are available online and at specialty shops that sell herbal or traditional medicine products.

Jiaogulan tea is caffeine-free and, with its slightly bittersweet flavor, tastes similar to a mild green tea. It can be blended with other teas, such as jasmine, or enjoyed on its own. Steep jiaogulan in hot water; many recommend doing so for at least 10 minutes.

There is no standard dosage for jiaogulan, although alternative health practitioners often call for two to four cups a day.

Dietary supplements are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). To ensure you are purchasing a quality product, look for an independent, third-party seal on the label. It should come from an organization that provides quality testing, such as NSF International or ConsumerLab.

This does not offer a guarantee of safety, but it can give you confidence that what's on the label is actually what's in the product.

Store jiaogulan in a cool, dark, and dry location.

Summary

Jiaogulan supplements may offer health benefits for a range of health issues. Diabetes, obesity, and stress are a few that have some supporting, though limited, research. There are many more potential health impacts that are under study.

For now, the herb is considered safe to use, but some people—such as those with immune and blood conditions—need to do so with caution or avoid it altogether. It's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before adding a supplement to your diet.