

# Shatavari: More Than Just a Woman's Herb

Photo: courtesy of Neha Vindhya



*Asparagus racemosus* has a long and venerable history of use in Ayurveda. Originally assigned the subfamily *Asparagea* in the *Lillaceae* family, in 1998 it was reassigned to the new subfamily *Asparagaceae*. [1] The Sanskrit word *shatavari* loosely translates to “she who has 100 husbands”[2] alluding to its reputation as a rasayana for both male and female reproductive dhatus.

## Rasa, Virya & Vipaka

According to Sushruta, the root is bitter and sweet in taste, its virya is cold, and its vipaka is sweet - all of which help to explain its effects in alleviating vata and pitta. Sushruta also tells us the leaves and shoots are bitter, which alleviate kapha and pitta.[3] Although both parts of the plant are used in Ayurvedic medicine, it is the root that appears to be more widely used.

## Biomedical Actions

References by Pole, Lad & Frawley, and Tierra & Khalsa agree with the energetics given to us by Sushruta and list the gunas of Shatavari as unctuous and heavy. [4-6] The combination of bitter and sweet is often considered unique in plant energetics, as bitter is reducing to tissues while sweet is tonifying, however it is this unique combination that gives the following biomedical actions: demulcent, galactagogue, aphrodisiac, anti-inflammatory, artava rasayana, vajikarana, adaptogen, nervine, immunomodulator (builds ojas), and antibacterial. When used for conditions of vaginal dryness and to promote lactation, it is used as the chief herb in many formulations with great success. [4, 6] The combination of oily, bitter and sweet help to sooth inflamed gastrointestinal mucosa from high pitta in duodenal diseases, Crohn’s disease, dyspepsia and peptic ulcer. [3, 4]

## Interest from the Western Medical World

Because of Shatavari's many biomedical actions, Western medicine has developed a recent interest in the understanding and possible development of *Asparagus racemosus*. [1] One study has looked at the effects of ethanolic extracts of the herb on the mammary glands and uterus of pregnant female albino rats. The results suggest positive estrogenic effects such as mammary gland vascularization and uterine horn mass increases compared to untreated animals, substantiating the long held understanding of Shatavari as a female reproductive rasayana. [7]

Light has recently been shed on other rasayana properties of Shatavari. In Ayurvedic terms, rasyanas have specific ojas-building effects on the dhatus as well as the whole body, allowing one to better withstand stress. A dose-dependent increase in Natural Killer (NK) T cells was demonstrated in vitro, highlighting an important mechanism in understanding the rasayana activity described by the ancient texts. [8]

Research in the area of dyspepsia and duodenal ulcers show that Shatavari not only significantly reduces gastric secretions [9], but also has been shown to increase protective mucosal secretions that promote gastric ulcer healing [10]. Other work has demonstrated both anti-candida effects and antibacterial effects of Shatavari extracts and dried herb. [1, 11, 12]

Perhaps the most interesting Western research to date on Shatavari has been in the field of endocrinology in Type 2 Diabetes models. Extracts of Shatavari have been shown to increase insulin secretion in isolates of perfused pancreas as well as in the islet cells and an islet clonal cell line known as BRIN-BD11. [13] This work led to further in vivo studies, wherein Shatavari fed simultaneously with glucose improved glucose tolerance in diabetic rats. [14]

The biomedical effects of *Asparagus racemosus* or Shatavari have been known, published and utilized for thousands of years. Whether in a tea, *kwath* or *churna*, it has been used as an anti-inflammatory, a nervine tonic, to balance gastrointestinal issues, to improve infertility, to promote lactation, and for many other uses. When wondering what else Shatavari would be good for - remember that a plethora of data supports its use as one of the best known adaptogens in Ayurveda.

## References

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