

CHAGA, REISHI,
LION'S MANE, OH MY!

which medicinal mushroom is right for you?

By Megan Patiry



They're scattered across forest floors, peeking out from under fresh-cut lawns, and perched on tree-trunks like organic shelves. You might give them a lingering glance because of their beauty or oddness. But if you knew about the powerful healing properties hidden in some of these mushroom varieties, you might also stop to pick one (or three).

Not that we're advocating that you just pick random mushrooms; many are poisonous, and shouldn't be handled unless you're an expert. What we *are* advocating is getting your hands on a class of mushrooms referred to as *medicinal* mushrooms. These varieties have been used for thousands of years, in ancient cultures throughout the world, for their ability to treat everything from food allergies to HIV.¹

However, with all of the medicinal mushroom species (and derivative products) available today, it can be hard to determine the best variety for your specific concern or condition.

Below, we'll discuss several common symptoms and conditions that medicinal mushrooms may alleviate, such as low energy, stress, muscle soreness, and anxiety/depression; we'll also detail which of the most common medicinal mushrooms are most helpful for each complaint.

Medicinal Mushrooms: WHICH ONE SHOULD YOU TAKE?

SYMPTOM **LOW ENERGY**

Cordyceps. If your energy levels are low, or you're suffering from chronic fatigue, cordyceps should be one of your first choices of medicinal mushroom. Several studies have shown that supplementing with cordyceps increases your body's production of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the molecule often referred to as the "energy currency of life". ATP stores and transports all of the cellular energy that powers our daily activities, so an increase in ATP will likely result in a boost of energy.²

Reishi. Reishi is also great for increasing energy levels, although it works in a slightly different way from cordyceps. Studies show that it helps shuttle more energy to the brain (making it excellent for mental fatigue), and it also decreases overall fatigue.^{3,4} Many of these studies have been performed on cancer survivors and patients, which suggests just how powerful reishi can be as an energizer.

SYMPTOM **ACCELERATED AGING**

Lion's Mane. While lion's mane might look like nothing more than a bunch of shaggy hair (hence the name), this odd-looking 'shroom actually contains powerful anti-aging properties. Namely, potent antioxidants in lion's mane help reduce DNA damage from environmental toxins that cause physical signs of aging, such as wrinkles and sagging skin. In fact, molecules called polysaccharides in lion's mane have been shown to be particularly beneficial for aging skin, where they also stimulate collagen production and enhance skin's antioxidant enzymes.⁵

Chaga. Chaga is another go-to if you're looking to slow the aging process. Compared to three other medicinal mushrooms in a study, chaga was found to have the strongest antioxidant activity. As with lion's mane, chaga's antioxidants work to "mop up" excess free radicals that damage DNA.⁶ In addition, chaga extract was shown to reduce DNA damage by 40 percent in cells damaged by hydrogen peroxide.⁷

SYMPTOM **CHRONIC STRESS**

Cordyceps. Cordyceps shines once again when it comes to reducing stress. For hundreds of years, these mushrooms have been prized throughout China for their adaptogenic properties, which help the body respond to, adapt, and recover from various stressors. Adaptogens are a great solution for chronic, excess stress because, instead of simply acting as sedatives to lower stress in the moment, they work to enhance your body's future stress resilience. This translates into healthier responses to stressful situations in general.⁸

Reishi. Reishi acts as a great complement to cordyceps in helping reduce side-effects of stress, namely depression and anxiety. One study found that breast cancer patients experienced reduced anxiety and depression, as well as enhanced quality of life, when they were given reishi alongside conventional treatment. Patients who weren't given reishi didn't report any change in their stress levels.⁹

SYMPTOM **POOR EXERCISE RECOVERY**

Cordyceps. Not only does cordyceps increase energy levels and reduce fatigue, it's also excellent for improving workout recovery and boosting endurance and stamina. Studies show that it improves exercise performance by activating certain metabolic pathways in your skeletal system, while also providing antioxidant enzymes that aid with recovery from muscle soreness. Interestingly, one study showed that cordyceps supplementation improves exercise endurance capacity *with or without exercise*.¹⁰

SYMPTOM **LOW IMMUNITY**

Reishi. Reishi is well-known for its ability to boost overall immunity. It contains potent immunomodulators, which help your immune system fight external threats like bacteria, viruses, and even cancer in a more efficient and targeted way. Researchers have also discovered that reishi strengthens immune cells, inhibits fungal growth, and significantly enhances wound healing.^{11,12,13} In addition, studies have shown that reishi combined with antibiotics increases antimicrobial activity more so than antibiotics alone.¹⁴

SYMPTOM **BRAIN WOES/DEPRESSION**

Lion's Mane. Lion's mane reigns when it comes to alleviating mental-health conditions, as well as enhancing overall cognitive function. One study showed that women supplementing their diets with lion's-mane cookies experienced reductions in depression, irritation, and anxiety, while also improving their concentration, in just four weeks.¹⁵ Another study found that lion's mane contains compounds called Nerve Growth Factors (NGFs) that help regenerate and protect brain tissue. Participants who consumed lion's mane showed significantly higher scores on a cognitive-function scale compared to controls.¹⁶

CONDITION **CANCER**

Turkey Tail. Turkey tail, whose name comes from its colorful ridges that resemble turkey feathers, has been widely studied for its ability to help combat cancer by boosting immune function. It contains a potent polysaccharide compound, PSP, that has been shown to significantly enhance immunity in breast cancer patients without the harmful side-effects seen in traditional cancer treatments.¹⁷ Turkey tail also contains another polysaccharide, PSK, that is regularly prescribed to cancer patients in Japan both during and after radiation treatment; it is shown to not only fight tumors, but also to help keep the immune system strong throughout treatment.¹⁸

Chaga. Chaga has also been widely studied for its anti-tumor and chemoprotective effects; research shows it both containing the spread of, and killing, cancer cells.¹⁹ Specifically, chaga has been found to be effective against liver-, lung-, and brain cancer.^{20,21} Scientists believe that chaga's cancer-fighting properties lie in its ability to disrupt rogue cells (i.e. cancer and tumor cells). Like turkey tail, chaga caused no nasty side-effects.

CONDITION INFECTION

Shiitake. Shiitake, one of the culinary medicinal mushrooms, adds a rich, meaty flavor to dishes; it also helps combat infections. One study showed that shiitake was able to kill the oral bacteria responsible for gingivitis better than chlorhexidine, the active component in popular gingivitis-treatment mouthwashes. Moreover, not only did shiitake decimate the pathogenic bacteria, but it also spared the remaining helpful bacteria, which chlorhexidine would have killed indiscriminately.²²

Maitake. Another study revealed that extracts of maitake can activate specific T-cells in the body that enhance its ability to fight dangerous bacteria (in this case, the foodborne *Listeria* bacteria).²³

HOW TO USE YOUR SHROOMS



Powders and capsules: Most medicinal mushrooms can be found either encapsulated or in powdered form. If you buy capsules, you can simply take the recommended dosage. If you prefer powders, you can get creative in adding them to drinks and even baked treats. For example: mix in some reishi or chaga powder with some heated almond milk, raw cacao, raw honey, and a pinch of vanilla for a healing hot chocolate. Or consider adding powders to Paleo cookies, bars, or even ice cream if you make your own.



Teas: You can find many medicinal mushrooms in tea form in your local health-food store, or you can try your hand at brewing a tea from ground mushrooms. As an example, you can make a batch of chaga tea by boiling 4 cups of water, adding a few scoops of ground chaga or chunks, and then removing it from the heat and letting it steep for at least five minutes.



Coffee and smoothies: Mushroom coffee is all the rage right now; you can either choose a brand that already has mushroom extracts in it, or you can add your own mushroom powders to your lattes. If you're looking for another way to get a quick dose of mushrooms, you can also add a small scoop to your smoothies.

However you prefer your 'shrooms, the most important thing is the health benefit you'll reap from these ancient fungi. Even if you're not suffering from any type of condition, medicinal mushrooms are an excellent complement to your diet; they'll keep your immune system running at optimal capacity, while also helping keep your stress levels in check.

RESOURCES

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