GINGER

Zingiber officinale

Family: Zingiberaceae

Parts Used: rhizome (commonly called a root)

Energetics: warming, drying (fresh rhizome); hot, drying (dried rhizome)

Taste: Pungent

Plant Properties: anti-inflammatory, diffusive, stimulating diaphoretic, stimulating expectorant, carminative, anodyne, antimicrobial, blood moving

Plant Gifts: Ginger can be worked with to address arthritis, migraines, colds and flu, nausea, dysbiosis, menstrual cramps (due to stagnation), ear infections, heart health, inflammation, stomach bugs.

Plant Preparations: culinary, decoction, powder, tincture, candied, fresh juice

It likely comes as no surprise that Ayurveda refers to ginger as the "universal medicine." Revered for centuries, ginger remains one of the most popular and versatile herbs today. Its wide-ranging benefits have been extensively studied, earning it recognition not only among herbalists but also within the framework of Western medicine.

This monograph explores the many ways ginger is utilized by herbalists, with a particular focus on its energetic qualities. By shifting our perspective from viewing ginger as merely a pharmaceutical substitute to appreciating its nuanced energetics, we can better tailor its use to individual needs, enhancing its effectiveness.

THE ENERGETICS OF GINGER

Ginger offers an excellent introduction to herbal energetics. Sip a hot ginger tea, and you'll likely feel a comforting warmth radiating from your core. For a deeper experience, compare tea made with fresh ginger to that made with dried ginger—the differences in heat and intensity are illuminating, revealing ginger's versatility in supporting various conditions.

In practical terms, this means that we work with dried and fresh ginger differently. Fresh ginger, with its milder heat, is often ideal for addressing acute infections and situations where gentler warmth is preferred. Dried ginger, with its concentrated intensity, acts as a potent stimulating expectorant and diaphoretic, making it more suitable for addressing deeper cold symptoms.

Beyond its heating nature, ginger is aromatic and dispersing, spreading warmth throughout the body. A strong ginger tea can even prompt sweating, demonstrating how excess heat can induce secondary cooling and balance. Ginger also promotes fluid loss through mechanisms like sweating and mucus secretion, reinforcing its drying qualities and its role in addressing damp conditions.

GINGER FOR INFLAMMATION AND PAIN

Ginger is a reliable ally for various types of pain due to its anti-inflammatory, blood-dispersing, and warming properties. It is especially effective for pain associated with coldness and stagnation.

Inflammatory Pain

Ginger is a wonderful herb for addressing conditions like osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, especially with accompanying signs of coldness and stagnation.

A review of clinical trials that was published in 2020 looked at how ginger works to reduce pain through various mechanisms, such as inhibiting prostaglandins (inflammation-related compounds), acting as an antioxidant, and influencing pain pathways.[1] It summarized randomized controlled trials from the last decade to evaluate ginger's effectiveness as a pain reliever for conditions like menstrual pain (dysmenorrhea), delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS), osteoarthritis (OA), chronic low back pain (CLBP), and migraine.

The findings showed promising results:

- **Dysmenorrhea:** Six studies found oral ginger effective for reducing menstrual pain.
- **DOMS:** Four studies showed reduced inflammation after using oral or topical ginger.
- **Knee osteoarthritis:** Nine studies agreed that oral and topical ginger can alleviate pain, though some found no significant differences.
- **Migraine:** One study suggested that ginger may help with migraine pain.
- **Chronic low back pain:** A single study found that Swedish massage with aromatic ginger oil reduced pain.

The review concluded that overall, ginger appears to be a safe and promising option for managing various types of pain.

Let's look at bit more closely at two studies with ginger (and other herbs) for addressing knee osteoarthritis.

Study #1 with Ginger

This study explored whether ginger powder could help reduce pain and inflammation in people with knee osteoarthritis.

The study involved 120 participants who were randomly divided into two groups: one group received capsules containing 500 mg of ginger powder daily, while the other group received placebo capsules filled with starch. Neither the participants nor the researchers knew who was taking what (a double-blind design). Blood samples were taken at the start of the study and after 3 months to measure two key inflammatory markers: TNF-α and IL-1β.

At the beginning of the study, both groups had similar levels of these inflammatory markers. After 3 months, the group taking ginger showed a significant reduction in both TNF-α and IL-1β compared to the placebo group.

In short, this study suggests that daily ginger supplementation could help lower inflammation in knee osteoarthritis, making it a promising natural option for managing this condition.[2]

Study #2 with Ginger, Turmeric, and Pepper

One study explored how a combination of turmeric extract, ginger, and black pepper might help people with chronic knee osteoarthritis. The researchers compared the herbal blend to Naproxen, a common pain-relief drug, in 60 participants with moderate knee osteoarthritis. Over four weeks, the participants took either the herbal supplement twice a day or a Naproxen capsule. The researchers measured prostaglandin E2 (PGE2)—a marker of inflammation—before and after the study.

The results showed that both the herbal supplement and Naproxen significantly reduced PGE2 levels, meaning they both helped lower inflammation. Importantly, there was no significant difference between the two groups, suggesting that the herbal combination worked as effectively as the drug.[3]

Stagnant Blood Pain

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), pain is often attributed to stagnant blood. Ginger can be applied topically for bruises or contusions, or used internally for symptoms like painful, delayed menstruation or clotting. It excels in relieving menstrual pain linked to coldness and stagnancy.

One study explored whether ginger could help relieve pain from primary dysmenorrhea (painful periods). It involved 120 university students with moderate to severe period pain, who were randomly divided into two groups. One group received capsules containing 500 mg of ginger root powder, while the other received placebo capsules.

Two approaches were tested: starting the capsules two days before the menstrual period and continuing through the first three days, or taking them only during the first three days of the period.

Participants in both groups took their assigned capsules three times a day, and their pain levels were assessed using a verbal scoring system and a visual scale. Ginger was shown to significantly reduce pain severity compared to the placebo in both treatment approaches. Additionally, it shortened the duration of pain when taken before the period, though this effect was not observed when ginger was taken only during the period.

The researchers concluded: "Taking ginger for five days (starting two days before menstruation) significantly reduced both the intensity and duration of menstrual pain. Ginger could be a natural and effective option for managing primary dysmenorrhea."[4]

Pain Due to Coldness

For individuals with cold signs—such as pale complexion, slow digestion, or lethargy—ginger is especially effective. However, it may not suit those with signs of heat.

Here's an interesting study looking at ginger's effects on circulation and warmth.

This study explored how ginger extract affects blood flow, eye fatigue, and shoulder stiffness in 100 healthy individuals aged 20-73 years. Participants were randomly assigned to take either ginger extract capsules or placebo capsules daily for eight weeks, with assessments conducted at the start, four weeks, and eight weeks.

The results showed that ginger did not improve ocular blood flow. However, it enhanced peripheral blood flow in deep areas among females, particularly those under 51 years old. In this subgroup, ginger also significantly improved self-reported eye fatigue and shoulder stiffness.

Interestingly, ginger favorably increased the sensation of body warmth in males aged 51 and older. Despite these benefits, there were no statistically significant changes in muscle stiffness.

In summary, ginger extract was effective at reducing eye fatigue and shoulder stiffness in younger females and improved body warmth in older males, demonstrating its potential for specific age- and gender-related benefits.[5]

For Migraines

I first learned from my mentor, Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa, that that ginger can halt a migraine when taken at the onset of visual disturbances (aura). In 2020 a meta-analysis of randomized controlled studies evaluated

whether ginger is effective for treating migraines compared to a placebo. The researchers analyzed data from three randomized controlled trials involving migraine patients.

The study found that ginger significantly improved the number of patients who were pain-free two hours after treatment and reduced pain scores at the same time point compared to the placebo. However, it did not have a significant impact on overall treatment response or the total number of adverse events. Notably, patients in the ginger group experienced less nausea and vomiting than those in the placebo group.

The researchers concluded that ginger is a safe and effective option for reducing migraine pain within two hours of treatment, with added benefits of lower nausea and vomiting incidence.[6]

THE IMMUNOMODULATORY ACTIONS OF GINGER

Ginger has long been celebrated in Ayurveda for its extensive health benefits, extending far beyond pain relief and warming qualities. Modern research highlights its role in supporting immune balance, making it a valuable ally in managing inflammation and immune-related conditions.

Ginger contains bioactive compounds, like gingerols and shogaols, which help regulate the immune system. These compounds have been shown to reduce inflammation and support the body's natural defenses by calming overactive immune responses. By influencing inflammation at a cellular level, ginger helps maintain balance within the immune system.[7]

This immune-supportive action makes ginger particularly helpful for addressing chronic inflammatory conditions like arthritis or colitis. Its ability to soothe inflammation and reduce oxidative stress has been supported by scientific studies, confirming what herbalists have known for centuries.

FOR COLDS AND FLU

If I could only have one herb during an upper respiratory illness like a cold or flu, I would have to choose ginger, simply because it does so much! (And I personally love its warming qualities.)

Here are some ways we can work with ginger to alleviate common cold and flu symptoms:

- **Sore throats:** Ginger tea, freshly juiced ginger, or ginger-infused honey provide soothing relief and antimicrobial benefits. Fresh ginger is best for this purpose.
- **Congestion:** Ginger's dispersing nature helps clear mucus, making it useful for congested coughs and stuffy sinuses. A strong ginger tea, pastilles, or topical application over the chest can ease congestion. Dried ginger often works great, especially if there are notable signs of coldness.

- **Warming up:** A potent cup of ginger tea warms the body from the inside, ideal at the onset of a cold or flu when chills are prominent. Either fresh or dried works, but I prefer fresh if I want the strong antimicrobial properties.

GINGER AND COVID-19

A promising study has explored ginger's potential benefits in addressing COVID-19 infections.

In this study, 227 hospitalized COVID-19 patients were randomly assigned to a control group (132 patients) or an intervention group (95 patients). The intervention group received 1.5 grams of ginger twice daily, in addition to standard medical care, until discharge. Both groups received the same general medical care, with the length of hospital stay compared between them.

Patients in the ginger group had significantly shorter hospital stays, with an average reduction of 2.4 days compared to the control group. The effect was particularly notable in men, individuals aged 60 or older, and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

The researchers concluded that ginger supplementation significantly reduced the length of hospital stays for COVID-19 patients, suggesting it may serve as a helpful complementary treatment. Naturally, further studies are needed to confirm these findings, and I would be particularly interested in seeing research that uses fresh ginger rather than dried.

FOR DIGESTIVE ISSUES

Ginger is among the best herbs for digestive health. Its warming, aromatic, and dispersing qualities address cold and stagnant digestion.

- **Symptoms of stagnant digestion:** These include bloating, gas, constipation, a heavy feeling after meals, and cold hands and feet. Ginger helps by stimulating digestive processes and improving circulation.
- **Nausea:** Ginger is a go-to remedy for nausea, whether from pregnancy, motion sickness, chemotherapy, or surgery.[8] A small piece of candied ginger works wonders for travel-induced queasiness.
- **Food poisoning:** Ginger's antimicrobial properties make it effective against bacterial pathogens like *Shigella*, *E. coli*, and *Salmonella*. It also relieves associated cramping. Fresh ginger is best.

FOR HEART HEALTH AND TYPE 2 DIABETES

Ginger supports cardiovascular health by helping to address underlying metabolic issues such as insulin resistance and inflammation.

One randomized, double-blind clinical trial examined the effects of ginger on blood sugar and lipid levels in individuals with type 2 diabetes. The study included 103 participants aged 20–80 years who were using oral antidiabetic medications and had HbA1c levels between 6.0% and 10%. Participants were divided into two groups, with one group receiving 1.2 grams of ginger daily and the other receiving a placebo over a 90-day period.

The results showed that participants in the ginger group experienced a greater reduction in fasting blood sugar and total cholesterol levels compared to the placebo group. Secondary measures, such as insulin resistance, also indicated potential benefits.

The researchers concluded that ginger supplementation may help manage blood sugar and cholesterol levels in individuals with type 2 diabetes.[9]

A review in 2021 looked at the effects of ginger and its constituents in the prevention of metabolic syndrome.

The review reported that:

- **Diabetes:** Ginger improves insulin sensitivity, reduces blood sugar levels, and enhances glucose uptake in muscle tissues, partly through its effects on insulin-related pathways.
- **Dyslipidemia:** Studies show ginger reduces levels of LDL cholesterol, triglycerides, and total cholesterol while improving HDL cholesterol.
- **Obesity:** Ginger has been shown to decrease body weight and fat mass by promoting fat metabolism and suppressing adipose tissue inflammation.
- **Hypertension:** Ginger helps lower blood pressure through multiple mechanisms, including improving endothelial function and reducing vascular inflammation.

The researchers concluded that ginger is a promising natural agent for managing metabolic syndrome and its associated risk factors.[10]

FOR INFECTIONS

Ginger's antimicrobial properties make it effective against various infections. Here are some ways I've worked with and recommended ginger for infections:

- **Ear Infections:** Fresh ginger juice can be used as ear drops (avoiding use with perforated eardrums).
- **Fungal Infections:** A poultice of fresh ginger root works well for external fungal infections but should be avoided on sensitive skin.
- **Stomach Bugs:** Ginger is traditionally used for intestinal parasites and digestive upset.

A review published in 2019 highlights the antimicrobial properties of ginger, emphasizing its effectiveness against bacteria, fungi, and viruses (while distinguishing between the activities of fresh and dried ginger).[11]

Here's a summary of the review:

- **Antibacterial Activity:** Ginger is effective against bacteria like *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Staphylococcus aureus*, inhibiting biofilm formation and disrupting bacterial cell membranes. Compounds such as 6-shogaol and gingerenone-A play a role in reducing bacterial viability by impairing enzymatic activity. Ginger also shows potential in reducing dental caries by targeting *Streptococcus mutans*, impairing its adherence and glucan synthesis.
- **Antifungal Activity:** Ginger essential oil demonstrates potent antifungal properties by disrupting fungal cell membranes and reducing ergosterol synthesis, a key component of fungal cell walls.
- **Antiviral Activity:** Fresh ginger exhibits strong antiviral properties, particularly against human respiratory syncytial virus (HRSV). It inhibits viral attachment and internalization in respiratory tract cells. Additionally, clinical studies indicate ginger's potential in reducing viral loads in hepatitis C virus (HCV) patients.

- **Fresh vs. Dried Ginger:** The paper highlights distinct differences between fresh and dried ginger:
  - **Fresh Ginger:** Contains higher levels of gingerols, which are particularly effective against viruses, such as HRSV.
  - **Dried Ginger:** The drying process converts gingerols into shogaols, increasing its potency against bacteria and fungi. Compounds like 6-shogaol exhibit stronger antibacterial and antifungal effects, disrupting microbial structures and inhibiting toxin production.

AS A SYNERGIST

Ginger is renowned not only for its standalone benefits but also for its ability to enhance the efficacy of other herbs and pharmaceuticals. Acting as a synergist, ginger improves circulation, aiding in the efficient delivery of active compounds throughout the body. This property allows herbs and medications to work

more effectively, particularly in areas where blood flow might otherwise be restricted.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), ginger plays a central role in many formulations, with over half of Chinese herbal formulas incorporating ginger for its synergistic effects. Its warming and dispersing nature not only amplifies the effects of other herbs but also helps harmonize formulas by reducing potential side effects, such as digestive discomfort. For example, ginger is often paired with cold or bitter herbs to offset their cooling or harsh effects on the stomach.

Beyond TCM, modern research suggests that ginger's ability to enhance absorption may be linked to its impact on gut health and blood flow. It has been shown to improve the bioavailability of certain compounds, such as curcumin (the active ingredient in turmeric), and enhance the body's ability to utilize them.

In pharmaceutical contexts, ginger may also enhance the action of medications by promoting better absorption and reducing inflammation. For instance, its ability to improve peripheral circulation can make it particularly useful in conditions where medication delivery to extremities might be compromised.

Ultimately, ginger's role as a synergist underscores its versatility, making it a valuable addition to both herbal and conventional treatments. Its ability to bridge the worlds of tradition and modern science further cements its place as an indispensable herb in both ancient and contemporary practices.

BOTANICALLY SPEAKING

Ginger, scientifically known as *Zingiber officinale*, is a perennial herbaceous plant belonging to the Zingiberaceae family, which also includes turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) and cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*). Native to Southeast Asia, ginger has been cultivated for thousands of years for its culinary, medicinal, and aromatic properties.

Plant Structure

The most recognizable and utilized part of the ginger plant is its rhizome—a horizontal, underground stem that stores nutrients and gives rise to roots and shoots. The rhizome is knobby, aromatic, and fibrous, with a tan outer skin and pale yellow interior. It is the source of ginger's pungent and medicinal compounds.

Ginger leaves are lanceolate (long and narrow) with a pointed tip, growing alternately on the stem. They are bright green, smooth, and have a sheathing base that wraps around the stem.

The above-ground stem is a pseudostem formed by tightly rolled leaf bases, giving the plant a reed-like appearance. It typically grows to a height of 2–4 feet (60–120 cm).

Fine, fibrous roots extend from the rhizome, anchoring the plant and drawing nutrients from the soil.

Flowers

Ginger produces small, attractive flowers, though they are rarely seen in cultivated plants since propagation typically occurs via the rhizome. The flowers are arranged in spikes that emerge from the base of the plant. They are a yellow-green color with purple or red markings, adding an ornamental appeal. The flowers have a tubular shape with three lobes, characteristic of plants in the Zingiberaceae family.

Habitat and Growth

Ginger thrives in tropical and subtropical climates, preferring warm temperatures and high humidity. It requires well-drained, loamy soil rich in organic matter and a pH range of 5.5–6.5. The plant is typically grown in partial shade to mimic its natural understory habitat.

Reproduction and Cultivation

Ginger is propagated primarily through its rhizomes rather than seeds. Healthy, mature rhizome sections with visible buds are planted in moist soil, where they sprout into new plants.

Harvesting typically occurs 8–10 months after planting when the rhizomes have fully matured, though younger rhizomes are often harvested earlier for their tender, milder flavor.

PLANT PREPARATIONS

Fresh Ginger

Fresh ginger is widely available and known for its vibrant flavor and versatile uses. Look for plump, firm pieces with smooth, unwrinkled skin to ensure freshness. Fresh ginger is slightly milder in its warming nature compared to dried ginger, making it suitable for addressing acute conditions or when a gentler approach is desired.

Fresh ginger has been shown to be especially effective as an antiviral, making it a go-to for conditions such as:

- **Sore throats:** Fresh ginger tea or ginger-infused honey can soothe irritation and combat microbes.
- **Colds and flu:** Its dispersing and antimicrobial properties make it ideal for the early stages of illness, especially when symptoms include chills or congestion.
- **Digestive upset:** Fresh ginger's mild heat is excellent for easing nausea or promoting digestion, particularly after a heavy meal.
- **Preparation tip:** Fresh ginger can be grated, juiced, sliced, or crushed, depending on your desired use. For culinary purposes, peeling is unnecessary but can be done easily with a spoon to remove the thin skin.

Dried Ginger

Dried ginger has a much hotter and more concentrated nature, making it well-suited for conditions requiring deeper, more intense stimulation. Its potency is enhanced during the drying process, which converts gingerols into shogaols, compounds with heightened warming and anti-inflammatory effects.

Dried ginger is particularly useful for:

- **Chronic conditions:** Its penetrating heat is ideal for addressing deeper imbalances, such as chronic joint pain associated with coldness and stagnation (e.g., osteoarthritis).
- **Digestive support:** For sluggish digestion or cold-related symptoms like bloating, dried ginger can stimulate digestive fire.
- **Menstrual discomfort:** Dried ginger's warming properties help alleviate pain and stagnation associated with delayed or cold menstrual cycles.

To ensure potency, choose dried ginger that is vibrant and aromatic. It can be used in powdered form for teas, capsules, or as an ingredient in both culinary and herbal preparations.

Culinary Uses

Ginger is a staple in kitchens worldwide, valued for its ability to enhance both savory and sweet dishes. Fresh ginger brings a bright, zesty flavor to stir-fries, soups, and marinades, while dried ginger adds warmth and depth to baked goods and spice blends. Whether using fresh or dried ginger, it is an essential ingredient in creating complex, layered flavors.

Peeling ginger is optional. Leaving the skin intact can add extra fiber and flavor.

Dosage Suggestions

- **Fresh Root:** 1-15 grams
- **Dried Root:** 1-6 grams
- **Tincture (fresh root):** 1:2, 60% alcohol; 1-2 mL three times daily

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ginger is generally safe, with no reports of toxicity. However, due to its warming and drying qualities, it may not suit individuals with signs of heat or dryness. Large doses should be avoided during pregnancy, and those on blood-thinning medications should consult a healthcare provider before using ginger regularly.

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HERBAL ENERGETICS COURSE
How to be an Herbalist

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