GINKGO

Gingko is a Chinese herb which has been used for many applications. As is so common, only a few indications stand up to scientific testing, or have been sufficiently tested. In our college population, improving cognitive function is likely to generate the most interest. There are a number of aspects of cognitive function which can be evaluated; the studies and abstracts in my sources report using different names for these functions, and total number of subjects tested is low. However, in healthy, young to middle-aged people, overall memory improvements are likely in the range of 7%. Speed of working memory seems to be the function exhibiting the most improvement.

Several studies of healthy elderly report no protection to or improvement of memory, though in those with mild to moderate age-related memory or cognitive impairment there may be modest improvement. Studies of patients with dementias, including Alzheimer’s also indicate improvement, though these studies are of questionable quality.

Those with Raynaud’s syndrome and vertigo may experience fewer or less severe attacks, and women afflicted with breast tenderness and mood aspects of premenstrual syndrome may experience relief when taking ginkgo.

Other conditions likely improving with administration of ginkgo include the eye conditions diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma, and peripheral vascular disease.

Ginkgo may not be effective in reducing altitude sickness, SAD (seasonal affective disorder), sexual dysfunction, or tinnitus (ringing in the ear). A large trial showed that 240 mg daily in the elderly over 6 years does not significantly reduce the risk of hospitalization or death due to cardiovascular disease.

Initial studies with insufficient reliable evidence to rate effectiveness have been done on people with anxiety, ADHD, fibromyalgia, schizophrenia, recovery from stroke, and vitiligo (a skin condition).

The various chemical compounds in ginkgo can have significant adverse effects. Raw seeds, crude extracts, and even leaves, can cause strong allergic reactions, seizures and even death, or cause cancer; these sources are not recommended. Extracts of ginkgo leaves affect the ability of the liver to process various herbs and medications. Persons with seizure disorder and those taking medications that can increase the risk of seizure should not take ginkgo. Insulin and diabetic medications, and substances affecting blood clotting are likely to be affected, as are many other medications and herbs; it is best not to combine any substance (including ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and other over-the-counter medications) which is pharmacologically active without checking with your practitioner. Anyone with allergy to poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac, mango rind, and cashew shell oil is more likely to have an allergic reaction to ginkgo.
Dosages vary, and likely vary depending on the extract. Because ginkgo irritates the gut, start at a maximum of 120 milligrams (mg) of standardized extract daily, divided into two or three doses, except for improvement of cognitive function when a single dose can be used. If no benefit occurs, and once the gut is normal, total daily dose can be tapered up to a total daily dose of 600 mg. Ginkgo leaf extract is often combined with American ginseng; this combination was used in studies of ADHD but should not be used for PMS. Ginkgo with co-enzyme Q10 was studied as treatment for fibromyalgia.

In a local grocery store natural health section, six products are available containing ginkgo. Three are combinations with multiple herbs, including gotu kola, an herb containing caffeine. One is one of the most frequently evaluated standardized extracts, and two are standardized extracts plus a modest amount of the dried whole leaf. There is some evidence of increased benefit from the whole leaf; presumably the amount added to these preparations is insufficient to cause side effects in most people.

Resources:

Natural Medicines comprehensive Database, accessed 2/21/2012

UpToDate, accessed 1/31/2012