News and our views

Ginseng helps cancer-related fatigue

Ginseng taken as an herbal supplement may help significantly improve cancer-related fatigue, according to Mayo Clinic-led research involving 40 cancer centers. Cancer-related fatigue is a common problem that can greatly impact quality of life. Even when underlying causes of fatigue — such as anemia, pain, depression or cancer therapy — have been addressed or stopped, cancer-related fatigue can persist.

The research, presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting, involved about 340 men and women with cancer-related fatigue. About half of the participants took 2,000 milligram capsules of American ginseng twice a day. The capsules contained a 3 percent concentration of the active substance in ginseng (ginsensosides). The other half of participants took an inactive substance (placebo).

Fatigue levels improved somewhat in the ginseng group after four weeks. At eight weeks, ginseng takers experienced a 20-point improvement on a 100-point fatigue improvement scale, with no detectable side effects. Those taking a placebo experienced only a 10-point improvement.

Mayo Clinic cancer experts are excited to see a possible tool for cancer-related fatigue. Still, more research is needed to identify how ginseng works and the optimal way to use it for cancer fatigue. Development of a safe, standardized ginseng supplement also is necessary so that people know what they're getting and, therefore, can have more-predictable results. ❐

New app can help you avoid allergens that cause eczema

If you have allergic contact eczema, also called dermatitis, choosing skin care products can be a trial-and-error process. Now there's a new application (app) developed by a Mayo Clinic doctor that you can download onto your computer or mobile phone to take the guesswork out of product selection.

Allergic contact dermatitis causes itchy, red, scaly, and, sometimes, painful or swollen skin areas. One cause can be ingredients of skin care products such as moisturizer, sunscreen, shampoo or deodorant. Many products contain certain ingredients that may cause you to develop dermatitis. Moreover, ingredients may not be listed on the label, they may be confusing chemical names, or a product may change formulation.

The Contact Allergen Replacement Database (CARD) app tracks more than 8,000 ingredients found in some 5,500 consumer skin care products. It allows users to look for skin care products that are free of the most common chemicals that cause allergic reactions.

The app can also be personalized. With skin allergy patch testing, you can obtain a list of skin care chemicals that cause your allergies. This list can be uploaded into your personal database, and the app will tell you which products are safe for you to use. CARD keeps product ingredient information up to date, so if there's a formulation change in a product, it's reflected in the advice you receive. The service is free for six months and is available for an annual fee of about $5 thereafter.

(Mayo Clinic and the doctor who developed the app have a financial interest in the product and will receive royalties from its sale.) ❐

Ischemic colitis

Reduced blood flow to the colon

It began midmorning as a little discomfort on the left side of your abdomen. Initially, you thought it was just gas, nothing to worry about. But within the hour it suddenly became more painful. As it got worse, you had the sudden urge to have a bowel movement — and the result was bloody diarrhea.

Bloody diarrhea requires prompt medical attention. It may signal a number of serious diseases or conditions, including infection and inflammatory bowel disease. If you're an adult older than 60, there's a good chance the pain and bloody diarrhea resulted from a sudden reduction in blood flow to part of your large intestine (colon).

Ischemic (is-KEE-mik) colitis can lead to areas of colon inflammation and, in rare instances, even permanent colon damage. However, with proper medical care, the vast majority who encounter ischemic colitis typically recover in a day or two and never have another episode.

A matter of flow

Your colon is constantly nourished by blood flow through a network of arteries. Of the two main arteries that feed this network, one supplies blood to the middle and right side of your colon and the small intestine, and the other supplies the colon's left side. Vessels also branch from the two main arteries to form extensive connections that create a secondary (collateral) blood supply. In the event of a blocked or narrowed artery, collateral vessels can help reroute vital blood flow to the colon.

Even under normal circumstances, the colon receives less blood flow than any other portion of your gastrointestinal tract. As a result, if the colon is suddenly subjected to reduced blood flow — whatever the reason — its tissues may be damaged.

Copyright of Mayo Clinic Health Letter is the property of Mayo Foundation for Medical Education & Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.