

herbs at a glance

Thunder God Vine



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This fact sheet provides basic information about thunder god vine—common names, what the science says, potential side effects and cautions, and resources for more information.

Common Names—thunder god vine, lei gong teng

Latin Name—*Tripterygium wilfordii*

Thunder god vine is a perennial vine native to China, Japan, and Korea. It has been used in China for health purposes for more than 400 years. In traditional Chinese medicine, it has been used for conditions involving inflammation or overactivity of the immune system. Currently, thunder god vine is used as a traditional or folk remedy for excessive menstrual periods and autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and lupus.

Extracts are prepared from the skinned root of thunder god vine.

What the Science Says

- Laboratory findings suggest that thunder god vine may fight inflammation, suppress the immune system, and have anti-cancer effects.
- Although early evidence is promising, there have been few high-quality studies of thunder god vine in people. Results from a large study funded by the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), which compared an extract of thunder god vine root with a conventional medicine (sulfasalazine) for rheumatoid arthritis, found that participants' symptoms (e.g., joint pain and swelling, inflammation) improved more significantly with thunder god vine than with sulfasalazine.
- A small study on thunder god vine applied to the skin found benefits for rheumatoid arthritis symptoms.
- There is not enough scientific evidence to assess thunder god vine's use for any other health conditions.

Side Effects and Cautions

- Thunder god vine can cause severe side effects and can be poisonous if it is not carefully extracted from the skinned root. Other parts of the plant—including the leaves, flowers, and skin of the root—are highly poisonous and can cause death.

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- A number of participants in the NIAMS study experienced gastrointestinal adverse effects such as diarrhea, indigestion, and nausea, as well as upper respiratory tract infections. (The rate of adverse effects was similar in the thunder god vine and sulfasalazine groups.)
- Thunder god vine can also cause hair loss, headache, menstrual changes, and skin rash.
- There are no consistent, high-quality thunder god vine products being manufactured in the United States. Preparations of thunder god vine made outside the United States (for example, in China) can sometimes be obtained, but it is not possible to verify whether they are safe and effective.
- Thunder god vine has been found to decrease bone mineral density in women who take the herb for 5 years or longer. This side effect may be of particular concern to women who have osteoporosis or are at risk for the condition.
- Thunder god vine contains chemicals that might decrease male fertility by changing sperm.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary health practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about complementary and alternative medicine, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

Sources

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For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely* (nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiselyuse.htm).

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