BIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES OF ASHWAGANDHA (Withania somniferous)

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Abstract: Withania somniferous (Ashwagandha) is a plant used in medicine from the time of Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine. The dried roots of the plant are used in the treatment of nervous and sexual disorders. From chemistry point of view, the drug contains group of biologically active constituents known as withanolides. The chemical structures of withanolides have been studied and they are widely distributed in family Solanaceae. Withaferin-A is therapeutically active withanolide reported to be present in leaves. In animal studies, withaferin A has shown significant anticancer activity. Majority of the anticancer drugs like Vinblastine, Vincristine, and Texel have been derived from green flora. Today there is much interest in natural products with anticancer activity. Withanolides are of under research potential as far treatment of cancer is concerned. The article reviews the scope of studies published in favor of anticancer potential of withaferin-A.

Keywords: Withania somniferous, Biological activities, antibiotic, abortifacient, anti-inflammatory.

Introduction: Plants have been the major source of drugs for the treatment of diabetes mellitus (DM) in Indian medicine and other ancient systems in the world, and for a long time DM has been treated orally with herbal medicines or their extracts. Because plant products are frequently considered to be less toxic and more free from side effects than synthetic ones. Furthermore, after the recommendations made by the WHO on DM, investigations on hypoglycaemic agents from medicinal plants have become more important and the search for more effective and safer hypoglycaemic agents has continued to be an important area of active research. World ethno botanical information about medicinal plants reports that almost 800 plants could be us to control DM. Many herbs and plants have been described as possessing hypoglycemic activity when taken orally. Some of these plants have also been pharmacologically tested and shown to be of some value in human diabetes treatment. Lithuania somniferous (L.) Dunal, commonly known in Sanskrit as Ashwagandha, is a perennial plant belonging to the order Solanaceae. The pharmacological effects of the roots of W. somniferous are attributed to the presence of withanolides, a group of steroidal lactones. Its leaves are used in Ayurvedic and USANI systems for treatment of tumors and tubercular glands. A number of withanolide steroidal lactones have been isolated from the leaves of W. somniferous. And exhibit antibacterial, anti-fungal and antitumor properties. There are a number of reports elucidating the chemical and pharmacological properties of W. somniferous. Withania somniferous, (Ashwagandha), is a shrubby plant cultivated in India, parts of East Asia and Africa which offers tremendous potential as an energizing medicinal herb. Ayurvedic practitioners have used the roots of this plant for centuries with success as a tonic to increase vitality and longevity, as well as to treat health conditions as diverse as tumors and arthritis. Recent laboratory studies have begun to confirm what Ayurvedic practitioners have known for years – that Withania somniferous deserves attention as an herbal therapy to ease or even eliminate many of today’s common health problems. Sometimes referred to as Indian ginseng. Because of its stimulating effects, Ashwagandha is used to calm the mind, relieve weakness and nervous exhaustion, build sexual energy and promote healthy sleep. The herb is
Ashwagandha has been traditionally termed a Ramayana. In Ayurvedic practice, which means it acts as a tonic for vitality and longevity. It is also classified as an adaptive. Chemical Composition: Laboratory analysis has revealed over 35 chemical constituents contained in the roots of Withania somniferous. The biologically active chemical constituents are alkaloids (isopeltlerterine, an ferine), steroidal lactones (withanolides, withaferins), saponins containing an additional acryl group (sitoindoside VII and VIII), and withanoloides with a glucose at carbon 27 (sitoindoside XI and X). Withania somniferous is also rich in iron. The roots of Withania somniferous consist primarily of compounds known as withanolides, which are believed to account for its extraordinary medicinal properties. Withanolides are steroidal and bear a resemblance, both in their action and appearance, to the active constituents of Asian ginseng (Pan ax ginseng) known as ginsenosides. Ashwagandha's withanolides have been researched in a variety of animal studies examining their effect on numerous conditions, including immune function and even cancer. Chemical analysis of Ashwagandha shows its main constituents to be alkaloids and steroidal lactones. Among the various alkaloids, with nine is the main constituent. The other alkaloids are somniferine, so nine, somniferin, withaninane, pseudo-with nite, atropine, pseudo-atropine, 3-acryloyoxytropine, chorine, cuscohygrine, isopeltlerterine, an ferine andanahydrine. Two acryl steryl glycoside viz. sitoindoside VII and sitoindoside VIII have been isolated from root. The leaves contain steroidal lactones, which are commonly called withanolides. The withanolides have C28 steroidal nucleus with C9 side chain, with a six member lactones ring. Twelve alkaloids, 35 withanolides, and several sitoindosides from Withania somniferous have been isolated and studied. A sitoindoside is a withanolide containing a glucose molecule at carbon 27. Much of Ashwagandha's pharmacological activity has been attributed to two main withanolides, withaferin A and withanolide D. Further chemical analysis has shown the presence of the following: Ana ferine (Alkaloid), Anahygrine (Alkaloid), Beta-Sisterly, Chlorogenic acid (in leaf only), Cytokine (in fruit), Cuscohygrine (Alkaloid), Iron, Pseudotropine (Alkaloid), Scopolamine, Sommiferin (Alkaloid), Sommiferiene (Alkaloid), Trapani (Alkaloid), With nine (Alkaloid), Withanamine (Alkaloid) and Withanolides A-Y( Steroidal lactones). Pharmacological Activity: Centuries of Ayurvedic medical experience with Withania somniferous have revealed it to have pharmacological value as an adaptive, antibiotic, abortifacient, aphrodisiac, astringent, anti inflammatory, deobstructant, diuretic, narcotic, sedative, and tonic. Ashwagandha has been found to: Provide potent antioxidant protection. Stimulate the activation of immune system cells, such as lymphocytes and phagocytes. Counteract the effects of stress and generally promote wellness. Anti-stress: A study conducted by the Institute of Basic Medical Sciences at Calcutta University examined the effects of Ashwagandha on chronic stress in rodents. For a period of 21 days, the animals received a mild electric shock to their feet. The resulting stress on the animals produced hyperglycemia, glucose intolerance, increase in plasma corticosterone levels, gastric ulcerations, male sexual dysfunction, cognitive deficits, immunosuppressant and mental depression. Researchers using Withania somniferous discovered the animals given the herb an hour before the foot shock experienced a significantly reduced level of stress. This research confirms the theory that Ashwagandha has a significant anti-stress adaptogenic effect. Research conducted at the Department of Pharmacology, University of Texas Health Science Center indicated that extracts of Ashwagandha produce GABA-like activity, which may account for the herb's anti-anxiety effects. GABA (Gamma Amino-butryic acid) is an inhibitory neurotransmitter in the brain. Its function is to decrease neuron activity and inhibit nerve cells from over firing. This action produces a calming effect. Excessive neuronal activity can lead to restlessness and insomnia, but GABA inhibits the number of nerve cells that fire in the brain, and helps to induce sleep, uplift mood, and reduce anxiety. Ashwagandha has traditionally been used to stabilize mood in patients with behavioral disturbances. Research has revealed that the herb produces an anti-depressant and anti-anxiety effect in rodents comparable to the anti-depressant drug imipramine and the anti-anxiety drug lorazepam (Aptiva). In fact, Ashwagandha is one of the most widespread tranquilizers used in India, where it holds a position of importance similar to ginseng in China. It acts mainly on the reproductive and nervous systems, having a rejuvenating effect on
the body, and is used to improve vitality and aid recovery after chronic illness [12].

Chronic stress can cause conditions such as cognitive deficit, immunosuppressant, sexual dysfunction, gastric ulceration, irregularities in glucose homeostasis, and changes in plasma corticosterone levels. In a rat model of chronic stress syndrome, Withania somniferous and Panax ginseng extracts were compared and contrasted for their abilities to relieve some of the adverse effects of chronic stress [13].

Research results showed that both Ashwagandha and Panax ginseng decreased the frequency and severity of stress-induced ulcers, reversed stress-induced inhibition of male sexual behavior, and inhibited the effects of chronic stress on retention of learned tasks. Both botanicals also reversed stress-induced immunosuppressant, but only the Withania extract increased peritoneal macrophage activity. The activity of the Withania extract was about the same as the activity of the ginseng extract. Withania somniferous, however, has an advantage over Panax ginseng in that it does not appear to result in ginseng-abuse syndrome, a condition characterized by high blood pressure, water retention, muscle tension, and insomnia [14].

**Anti-oxidant Activity:** Researchers from Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, India, have discovered that some of the chemicals found in Withania somniferous are powerful antioxidants. Studies conducted on rats’ brains showed the herb produced an increase in the levels of three natural antioxidants superoxide dismutase, catalase and glutathione peroxides [15].

These findings are consistent with the therapeutic use of Withania somnifera as an Ayurvedic Ramayana. The antioxidant effect of active principles of Withania somniferous root may explain the reported anti-stress, cognition-facilitating, anti-inflammatory and anti-aging effects produced by them in experimental animals, and in clinical situations [16].

**Anti-carcinogenic Activity:** Ashwagandha is reported to have anti-carcinogenic effects. Research on animal cell cultures has shown that the herb decreases the levels of the nuclear factor kappa, suppresses the intercellular tumor necrosis factor, and potentiates apoptotic signaling in cancerous cell lines. One of the most exciting of the possible uses of Ashwagandha is its capacity to fight cancers by reducing tumor size [15]. To investigate its use in treating various forms of cancer, the antitumor effects of Withania somnifera have been studied by researchers. In one study, the herb was evaluated for its anti-tumor effect in urethane-induced lung tumors in adult male mice [19]. Following administration of Ashwagandha over a period of seven months, the histologic appearance of the lungs of animals which received the herb was similar to those observed in the lungs of control animals.

**Anti-inflammatory Activity:** Research has explored the capacity of Ashwagandha to ease the symptoms of arthritis and other inflammatory conditions these studies have proven that the herb acts as an effective anti-inflammatory agent. Its naturally occurring steroidal content is much higher than that of hydrocortisone, a commonly-prescribed anti-inflammatory [20]. The effectiveness of Ashwagandha in a variety of rheumatologic conditions may be due in part to its anti-inflammatory properties. Rats given powdered root of Withania somnifera orally one hour before being given injections of an inflammatory agent over a three day period showed that Ashwagandha produced anti-inflammatory responses comparable to that of hydrocortisone sodium succinate [21].

**Anti-aging Activity:** Ashwagandha was tested for its anti-aging properties in a double-blind clinical trial. A group of 101 healthy males, 50-59 years old were given the herb at a dosage of 3 grams daily for one year. The subjects experienced significant improvement in hemoglobin, red blood cell count, hair melanin, and seated stature. Serum cholesterol decreased and nail calcium was preserved. Seventy percent of the research subjects reported improvement in sexual performance [6].

**Cardio Protective Activity:** Ashwagandha has been evaluated in clinical studies with human subjects for its diuretic, hypoglycemic, and hypocholesterolemic effects [22]. Six type 2 diabetes mellitus subjects and six mildly hypercholesterolemia subjects were treated with a powder extract of the herb for 30 days. A decrease in blood glucose comparable to that which would be caused by administration of a hypoglycemic drug was observed. Significant increases in urine sodium, urine volume, and decreases in serum cholesterol, triglycerides, and low-density lipoproteins were also seen.

**Hypothyroid Activity:** Animal studies have shown that Ashwaganda may have a effect on thyroid activity. An aqueous extract of dried Withania root was given to mice daily for 20
days. Significant increases in serum T4 were observed, indicating the plant has a stimulating effect at the glandular level. Withania somnifera may also stimulate thyroid activity indirectly, via its effect on cellular antioxidant systems. These results indicate ashwagandha may be a useful botanical in treating hypothyroidism.\textsuperscript{[23,24]}

Immunomodulatory Activity: A series of animal studies have demonstrated Ashwagandha to have profound effects on healthy production of white blood cells, which means it is an effective immunoregulator and chemo protective agent\textsuperscript{[25,26]}. In a study using mice, administration of powdered root extract from Ashwagandha was found to enhance total white blood cell count. In addition, this extract inhibited delayed-type hypersensitivity reactions and enhanced phagocyte activity of macrophages when compared to a control group\textsuperscript{[27]}. Recent research suggests a possible mechanism behind the increased cytotoxic effect of macrophages exposed to W. somnifera extracts\textsuperscript{[28]}. Nitric oxide has been determined to have significant effect on macrophage Cytotoxicity against microorganisms and tumor cells. Ionone et al demonstrated Withania somnifera increased no production in mouse macrophages in a concentration-dependent manner. This effect was attributed to increased production of inducible nitric oxide synthases, an enzyme generated in response to inflammatory mediators and known to inhibit the growth of many pathogens\textsuperscript{[29]}. Research has also shown Ashwagandha to have stimulatory effects, both in vitro and in vivo, on the generation of cytotoxic T lymphocytes, and a demonstrated potential to reduce tumor growth\textsuperscript{[30]}. The chemo preventive effect was demonstrated in a study of ashwagandha root extract on induced skin cancer in Swiss albino mice given ashwagandha before and during exposure to the skin cancer-causing agent (7,12-dimethylbenz[a]anthracite). A significant decrease in incidence and average number of skin lesions was demonstrated compared to the control group. Additionally, levels of reduced glutathione, superoxide dismutase, catalane, and glutathione peroxides in the exposed tissue returned to near normal values following administration of the extract. The chemo preventive activity is thought to be due in part to the antioxidant/free radical scavenging activity of the extract.

Other Therapeutic Benefits: Further studies have also shown ashwagandha to be effective in the treatment of osteoarthritis,\textsuperscript{[31]} inflammation\textsuperscript{[32]}, stroke\textsuperscript{[33]}, and parkinson's disease\textsuperscript{[34], 35]. Ashwagandha has been shown to be a potential antimicrobial agent, with antifungal activity\textsuperscript{[35]} and moderate antibacterial activity against Staphylococcus aurous and Pseudomonas Aeruginosa bacteria strains\textsuperscript{[36]}. Conclusion: The studies so far indicate that W. somnifera could prove to be a good natural source of a potent antihyperglycemic agent, with antifungal activity\textsuperscript{[35]} and moderate antibacterial activity against Staphylococcus aurous and Pseudomonas Aeruginosa bacteria strains\textsuperscript{[36]}.

References


