WHAT'S A CORDYCEPS? ALL ABOUT ADAPTOGENS

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Sometimes the latest wellness trends seem so simple, you might wonder why you weren't embracing them all along. There's meditation to rewire our brains and improve our overall health. Collagen (you know, the stuff that makes our skin look youthful but that we lose with aging) as a daily supplement to keep our hair, nails, and skin glowing. Writing in a gratitude journal to keep us more, well, grateful. But spiking our coffee and smoothies with adaptogens? For the science behind the buzziest of trends, we turned to the experts.

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WAIT WHAT'S AN ADAPTOGEN?

Everyone from Gwyneth to that girl you went to high school with who posts about her smoothies on Instagram is adding oddly-named mushrooms and herbs to their coffee (#MorningRoutine #Blessed). You think you might be into it but… well what the heck are they?

First things first: they might be trendy but they're not new. "People have been using adaptogens throughout the centuries, especially in China and India," explains Erin Michel, founder of Pure Feast, an online provider of pure food and eco-friendly goods. "Adaptogens kind of faded from people's health repertoires over time, but they began to be researched extensively again by the 1940's."

Ok cool. But what exactly IS an adaptogen? "Adaptogens are various botanicals such as different herbs and mushrooms that do exactly what their name implies – they help your body 'adapt' to stressful situations, whether that stress is environmental, emotional, physical or mental," says Michel.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

For the science behind adaptogens, we turned to our go-to expert, naturopathic doctor and Founder and Chief Inspirer of Healthy Living at Legacy, Dr. Meghan Walker.

"When you experience increased stress or chronic, unrelenting stress, the brain releases more of a hormone called Corticotropin releasing hormone (CRH) from the hypothalamus in the brain," she explains. "This hormone in turn triggers the release of a hormone in the pituitary gland (also in the brain) called adrenocortropic hormone (ACTH). This hormone then triggers the outer part of the adrenal gland to produce cortisol. Adaptogens work by blunting the release of CRH, thereby reducing pressure on the system. This action does not stop the cycle, but it prevents it from being squeezed."

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HOW DO THEY HELP?

It's easy to look at every trendy superfood and think "I definitely need that because one time I felt stressed and that's what this thing is good for" but how do you know if you would really reap any benefits?

"Adaptogens have been studied to show that they help balance and support your hormones, which then helps your body optimally perform different metabolic functions to help deal with those added stressors," says Michel.

Additionally, certain adaptogens can help strengthen the body's detoxification systems, boost energy, build stamina, and enhance cognitive functions.

Dr. Walker explains that the key work of adaptogens is in aiding in adrenal fatigue (you know, that other buzzy term). "Your adrenal glands are an organ that sit on top of your kidneys and produce a hormone called cortisol. This is a normal daily response. When we are under chronic unrelenting stress, the normal release of cortisol can become disrupted. This disruption can trigger many downstream reactions including fatigue, apathy, low blood pressure, thyroid disorders, depression and anxiety."

Adaptogens, she explains, have the capacity to modulate adrenal functionality.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY ADAPTOGENS?

There are a lot of (often hard to pronounce) adaptogens, but what does each one do? Here are a few of the key ones and their reported benefits.

- **Cordyceps:** Boosting energy and stamina
- **Lion's Mane:** Cognitive function
- **Ashwagandha:** Known to help balance hormones, lower cortisol, reduce inflammation, and help with stress and anxiety
- **He Shou Wu:** "An herb that's been studied for its longevity-producing compounds, as well as nourishing and toning your blood, protecting you from disease, and lowering stress levels," says Michel of the adaptogen she takes daily
- **Reishi:** Boosting the immune system and fighting fatigue
- **Chaga:** Stimulating the immune system, anti-inflammatory, balancing energy

Chelsea Shapouri via Unsplash

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO TAKE ADAPTOGENS?

There are powders, and pills, people adding them to their coffee and blending them into smoothies. So we wondered, is there a right way to take them?

In addition to adding them to our regular bevvy routine, Michel suggests adding some to any meal, mixing them into oatmeal or chia pudding, or putting a pinch in salad dressings or soups.

She even shared her go-to morning drink: matcha, cacao, collagen, MCT oil, ghee, hemp hearts, spinach, and warm water which she blends together to "keep me going for hours."

Dr. Walker also adds that when part of a doctor-prescribed regimen, "usually they are dosed several times per day on an empty stomach."

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SHOULD I BE TAKING ADAPTOGENS?

That depends. How sure are you that you need them?

"Not everyone needs an adaptogen and I don't recommend adding one to your diet unless you are working with a healthcare provider," cautions Dr. Walker. "There are many great adaptogen herbs that support your energy, anxiety and brain function."

What's more, they're not necessarily a cure-all and can potentially do more harm than good if not taken as advised.

"Depending on the type of adaptogen that is used," says Dr. Walker, "you can overstimulate the adrenal glands and in fact worsen anxiety or fatigue."

WHO SHOULD AVOID ADAPTOGENS?

"In order to be accurately classified as an adaptogen, the herb or mushroom by definition must be non-toxic and safe to consume with no ill side-effects," says Michel. "That said, certain people such as pregnant or nursing women, or anyone on medication, should check with their doctor or qualified healthcare provider to make sure that whatever adaptogen they're considering taking is right for them."

Dr. Walker offers similar cautions regarding pregnant and nursing women and adds that individuals on other medications including the birth control pill should similarly avoid them unless they have consulted with a medical professional.

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