He shou wu (Polygonum multiflorum), also known as "ho shou wu" or "fo-ti," is among the most popular herbs in traditional Chinese medicine and has been widely used as a rejuvenative tonic and anti-aging remedy.1-5

In Traditional Chinese medicine, he shou wu is used to tonify and improve liver and kidney function; moisten the intestines and unblock the bowels; lower cholesterol levels and inhibit atherosclerosis; and enhance immune system function. Practitioners of Chinese medicine have used he shou wu for a variety of health concerns, including angina (chest pain), blurred vision, constipation, dizziness, impotence, insomnia, premature aging and graying hair, respiratory system diseases, and weakness in the lower back and knees. He shou wu is also said to "calm the spirit" and "nourish the heart" (the seat of the emotions); thus, he shou wu is considered particularly useful for dream-disturbed sleep, especially in cases of repeated nightmares.1,2,6-15

He shou wu has demonstrated cardioprotective effects in numerous animal studies, including anti-atherosclerotic effects. One of the main constituents in he shou wu has been shown to significantly decrease serum total cholesterol and LDL cholesterol levels, as well as reduce the severity of experimentally-induced atherosclerosis. Recent in vitro studies also indicate that he shou wu reduces apoptosis (cell death) and helps protect endothelial function. Endothelial cells are specialized cells that line the arteries. Endothelial dysfunction impairs the ability for blood vessels to dilate and is an early indicator of atherosclerosis.2,11,13,16-18

He shou wu also exhibits significant antioxidant activity. He shou wu root extracts have been found to increase the activity of superoxide dismutase (SOD)—an antioxidant enzyme that protects cells against free radical damage—and inhibit the formation of oxidized lipids (fats), which is a risk factor for atherosclerosis. In addition, the antioxidant effects of he shou wu extracts may help prevent brain degeneration and inhibit age-related deficits in learning and memory ability. For example, the main constituent in he shou wu has been shown to prevent and even reverse Alzheimer’s disease-like learning-memory deficit in mice. Results from another study found that long-term pretreatment with he shou wu is neuroprotective (prevents damage to the brain) and may protect the brain against focal cerebral ischemia—a deficiency in blood supply to the brain, which can cause irreversible brain damage.3,4,11,12,19-22

He shou wu has also been studied for its immune system-enhancing effects and antibacterial and antiviral activities. He shou wu was found to be among the most active of 19 Chinese medicinal plants in combating pathogenic (disease-causing) isolates of methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in vitro. Additional research has shown that he shou wu contains an active ingredient that significantly blocks viral attachment and inhibits the infectivity of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) virus.1,4,23,24

Furthermore, research has discovered surprisingly high in vitro estrogenic activity in extracts of he shou wu. The estrogen bioactivity for he shou wu has been determined at approximately 1/300th that of estradiol—estradiol is the main estrogen influencing the menstrual cycle. Comparative analyses found that the estrogen activity in he shou wu was equivalent to that observed for red clover and soy, suggesting that he shou wu may be another natural alternative to estrogen replacement therapy for the treatment of menopausal symptoms.25-28

No interactions with drugs have been reported for he shou wu. According to some traditional sources, he shou wu should not be taken with onions, chives or garlic. Although he shou wu is generally a safe herb, it is not recommended for people with spleen deficiency, diarrhea or heavy phlegm in the respiratory tract. Those who are particularly sensitive to he shou wu may develop a skin rash. Reported side effects with he shou wu are generally rare and include diarrhea, flushing of the face and skin rashes. However, taking an excessive dosage (more than 15 grams) of he shou wu can cause numbness in the extremities.1,6,8

References:
4Hwang, I.K., et. al. "An extract of Polygonum multiflorum protects against free radical damage induced by ultraviolet B irradiation of...
the skin." Brazilian Journal of Medical and Biological Research; 2006, 39(9):1181-1188.


14Han, L.Q., et. al. [Determination of the contents of trace elements in chinese herbal medicines for treating respiratory system diseases]. Guang Pu Xue Yu Guang Pu Fen Xi; 2008, 28(2):453-455.


