

## Time hasn't changed the verdict on licorice



George Meinig, DDS

Dear Dr. Meinig:

**A number of years ago, you wrote about the problems that eating licorice causes, so I stopped using it. Now I hear it is good to treat a number of medical illnesses. Have these successes made you change your mind as to the general use of licorice? B.O.**

Dear B.O.: No, they sure haven't. What you have heard is true. For example, several derivatives of glycyrrhizer (the technical name for licorice) are active components of medications used to successfully treat stomach ulcers and some triterpenoids from licorice root are being advocated to stifle the rapid dividing cells of cancer. These beneficial examples and numerous others should not be confused with using pure licorice as these products are extracts of licorices. Using the individual parts of the herb cannot be compared to eating whole edible licorice.

Pharmaceutical researchers don't make any money promoting natural whole herbs as they can't be patented. For that reason, their research money goes into trying to isolate the integral parts of licorice that might prove helpful in treating disease conditions. This is important because specific controlled doses can then be recommended.

The major hazard in eating pure licorice candy and products heavily laden with it is that it is so easy to overdose; this is particularly so for children who have been known to eat a quarter pound of candy at one time.

That gets us back to the reasons for objecting to its use. One of these is its hormone-like qualities that can overstimulate one's adrenal gland to produce too much aldosterone, which in turn causes the body to retain sodium and to excrete potassium. The result is water retention, high blood pressure and muscle weakness.

Fairly high doses of licorice can be consumed when it is taken only occasionally. However, amounts just over one-third of an ounce per day, over long periods of time, have produced serious health problems. Dr. S. Brandon of the School of Medicine at the University of Leicester in England, reported that after consuming three or four Finnish licorice bars, he personally suffered a severe headache and found his blood pressure went to a very high 240/160 instead of its usual 120/70.

There are several varieties, including a Spanish and Russian licorice. Because licorice is 50 times as sweet as cane sugar, it has found many uses in pharmaceutical preparations, where it masks the bitter taste of medications.

Black licorice is a confection or candy made of amino acids, gums, wax, lignin, coumarins, amines, glucose, volatile oils, mannose, sucrose, mannitol, starch, tannins, stilbenes, flavanoids, steroids, triterpenes, saponins, and salicylic acid. It should be apparent from this long list of ingredients that one or more of them could easily cause problems.

It will probably surprise you to learn that 90 percent of the licorice imported into the United States is used in making tobacco products. Tobacco chewers are particularly prone to trouble, not only from the nicotine content of the toxic tobacco leaves, but from the licorice they contain as well.

Back in September of 1980, I mentioned in an article the possible detrimental effects that could occur to baseball players as so many stuff their cheeks grotesquely full of chewing tobacco. Not only does the licorice cut their potassium levels, but the tobacco they chew also does so. Some of the other symptoms baseball players can experience because of the licorice in tobacco, besides a shortage of potassium (hypokalemia) are: general muscle weakness, muscle damage, irregular heart beat, continuous thirst, dry skin, acne, insomnia, nervousness and water retention (edema).

How long is it going to take for baseball managers to see that some of the late inning failures of pitchers and hitters could be due to that mouthful of tobacco? If they would substitute my golfing mix consisting of unroasted sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds and almonds, it would stop the unsightly spitting but more important, the excellent variety of nutrients in this mix would help to win baseball games.

Ballplayers may think that having swollen cheeks and spitting tobacco juice is macho but they ought to wake up to the fact that a large number of the public find it disgusting. What a poor example for these esteemed athletes to bring to our young people.

Avoidance of licorice as a confection is the only plausible solution. The small amounts found in some preparations can usually be handled by the body if they are only consumed occasionally.

When one considers all the tasty, nutritious, natural foods that are available, that are not flavored with licorice, why tax your system with such confections?

**Everyone has a question about nutrition. Send yours to Dr. George E. Meinig, c/o Ojai Valley News, Box 277, Ojai, CA 93024.**

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