

HERBS THAT RAISE BLOOD

PRESSURE *by Ann Gerhardt, MD*

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Some well-known herbs increase blood pressure, sometimes to levels of clinically relevant hypertension (high blood pressure). Herbs' medicinal benefits derive from the presence of natural, bio-active chemicals. With anything bio-active, there is always the risk of unwanted side effects accompanying the desired benefits.

Currently, hypertension is defined as a blood pressure higher than 140/90. If only one of the numbers is higher than the cut-off, it still qualifies as hypertension. Those numbers are not strict cut-offs, below which health is assured and above which you should write your will and stop buying long CD's.

Current data make the case for a continuum of risk, with the danger for strokes and other vascular diseases rising as blood pressure increases above 125/75. Blood pressure tends to rise with age, as blood vessel walls gradually lose pliability.

List of herbs that raise blood pressure

Aniseed (maybe)	Cola alkaloids (caffeine)	
Bayberry	Ephedra	Ma Huang
Blue Cohosh	Gentian	Pau d'Arco
Calamus amines	Ginger	Scotch Broom
Capsicum	Ginseng	St. John's Wort
Chaste Berry	Guarana	Vervain
Chinese Vitex	Licorice	Yohimbe

Ephedra: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) removed ephedra from the market because it causes hypertension, asphyxiation, heart failure and death. It is related to **pseudoephedrine**, an over-the-counter decongestant, and to amphetamines used in diet pills and street drugs.

Ephedra, also known as **ma-huang** and *E. sinensis*, contains potent alkaloids, primarily ephedrine. They stimulate the body's nerve and hormone systems to boost blood pressure. Many herbal concoctions have used ephedra to boost energy. Though illegal, some currently available supplements contain ephedra-like stimulants which are not disclosed to the purchaser. This surreptitious addition is often how a vitamin pill makes people feel wonderful with 'just' vitamins.

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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

Written by Ann Gerhardt, MD

Licorice contains glycyrrhizic acid that raises blood pressure, increases blood sodium content and decreases blood potassium levels. As licorice dose increases, so does blood pressure. Only very small doses (~10-50 mg glycyrrhizic acid) are perfectly safe, corresponding to no more than 2 grams of Western licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) root.

In high doses, licorice can cause significant hypertension, even when not taken in pill form - Sustained consumption of licorice tea or real licorice candy has the same effect as pills. The maximum safe amount of real **licorice candy** ropes per day is 12 inches.

The licorice dose in most Chinese herb formulae tends to be low. A deglycyrrhized licorice (DGL) is available that does not raise blood pressure and appears to retain healing effects on stomach ulcers and gastritis.

Ginseng, at usual doses contained in most supplements, lowers blood pressure. However, Chinese practitioners inject very high doses to raise blood pressure in a person in shock (a sudden, severe drop of blood pressure). Check your blood pressure before and about 2 weeks after starting any ginseng-containing supplement to assess your individual response.

St. John's Wort contains a component that has MAO (monoamine oxidase) activity. This can cause hypertensive crisis if food containing the natural amino acid tyramine is consumed. Tyramine is found in beer on tap, red wine, liquors, aged meat and cheese, yeast extract, and soy sauces. The MAO component of St. John's Wort is minor, so many people will not experience hypertension even if these foods are consumed. To be safe, though, avoid tyramine-containing foods while taking the herb.

Others: Scotch Broom (*Cytisus scoparius*) contains the hypertensive alkaloid sparteine. Yohimbe contains the stimulant alkaloid yohimbine. For most herbs, the chemical components that lead to hypertension have not been identified.