

MUSHROOMS: FOOD AND MEDICINE

Throughout the world for thousands of years, mushrooms have been valued as both food and medicine. Mushrooms are almost a perfect health food, low in calories and fat, they contain high amounts of protein, vitamins, minerals and fiber. Now, in addition to praising mushrooms as a food source, Western medicine is finally recognizing and acknowledging the health-stimulating properties of mushrooms. The market for gourmet mushrooms is now being augmented by a market for medicinal mushrooms.

It is not surprising that mushrooms would be a source of many biologically active compounds. Mushrooms manage to grow in darkness and dampness in highly competitive environments and protect themselves from hordes of attacking microbes by developing natural protective substances. It should be remembered that the single most valuable botanical antibiotic in Western Medicine, penicillin, was obtained from a fungus.

There are many species of mushrooms that have been found to contain medicinally active compounds. Mushrooms contain compounds known as long-chain, large-molecular weight poly saccharides which when present in specific configurations or linkages (beta, 1-3 glucan and beta, 1-6 glucan), have strong effects on the immune system of humans. These natural compounds which cannot be artificially synthesized have proven useful in the treatment of both immune system deficiencies and also auto-immune disorders such as allergies, asthma and diabetes. Regardless of whether the pathology of the immune system is negative or positive (ie., too weak or too strong), mushrooms have a beneficial regulating effect on the immune system. This has proven useful in the treatment of cancer and AIDS. Mushrooms also contain other complex compounds such as triterpenoids and sterols which are specific to each mushroom and have specific effects in humans. These compounds have been used in the treatment of sexual impotence and dysfunction, high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, high-altitude sickness, neurological disorders, and many other health problems. In Oriental medicine, most medicinal mushroom preparations are regarded as tonics, that is they have beneficial health effects without negative side-effects and can be used on a regular, ongoing basis without harm. Often blends of various medicinal mushrooms are used for maximum benefit.

King Trumpet, Hon Shimeji, Enoki and Maitake are gourmet mushrooms that have all been found to contain medicinally active compounds beneficial to health. However, many species of potent medicinal mushrooms are not "gourmet", they are very bitter and/or hard and are used in the form of an extract, tea or powder. Reishi, Turkey Tail and Chaga are examples of mushrooms which are too bitter and hard to eat but which have very strong effects on health.

Golden Gourmet Mushrooms has recognized the medicinal value of mushrooms and in cooperation with Asian partners is currently developing and expanding the production, processing, marketing and distribution of a mushroom-based functional foods and medicinal mushroom products from several species of medicinal mushrooms. A diet which includes mushrooms on a regular basis is helpful in maintaining optimum health. Medicinal mushroom preparations can be very useful in regaining health and balance when it is lost.

