The Story of Ginkgo Biloba
For Problems Associated With Aging
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The Ginkgo biloba tree (abbreviated: Ginkgo) is the oldest tree on earth: more than 200 million years old. Individual Ginkgo trees can be old souls themselves sometimes living more than 1,000 years. Those of you who see nature as metaphor will not be surprised that extracts from the leaves of Ginkgo tree are being used effectively to treat a number of medical problems that are associated with aging. Even if you wish to grant Mother Nature that poetic license, the scientific research on Ginkgo is strong enough to stand on its own.

Medical use of Ginkgo leaves was mentioned in a Chinese herbal text as early as 1805. In modern Chinese medicine, Ginkgo is recommended to improve brain function and to relieve asthma. During the past 15-20 years, Ginkgo has been studied intensively by European scientists and found to be useful for a wide range of medical problems. Annual sales in Europe, where it is sold as prescription drug, amount of about $500 million. In the United States, Ginkgo is not approved by FDA as a prescription drug but is available in most health food stores.

A Panacea? When one reads the list of conditions that Ginkgo is used to improve it tends to look like a compendium of wonder cures presented by a seller of snake oil. However, Ginkgo influences at least the basic aspects of human physiology, it improves blood flow to the brain and other tissues and enhances cellular metabolism. Because these functions are so fundamental to good health, it is not unreasonable to expect that Ginkgo might favorably affect a number of seemingly unrelated medical problems. Most of the illnesses relieved by Ginkgo are associated with old age, a time of life when both blood flow and cellular metabolism could use a boost. Other disorders that may respond to Ginkgo, including asthma, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), vertigo and impotence, can also occur earlier in life.

Ginkgo If You’re “Getting Old”: As we get older, a lot of things start to fail us. We go to the doctor, but all the doctor says is, “That’s what happens when you get old.” Any such doctor should read the research on Ginkgo. In one study, 112 patients, average age 71, with numerous symptoms attributed to “chronic cerebral insufficiency,” were given 40 mg of Ginkgo, three times a day, for one year. During that time there were significant improvements in short-term memory, alertness, mood disturbances, vertigo, headaches, and tinnitus. There were no side effects and no interactions with commonly used heart and diabetes medications. Other studies have found similar results with Ginkgo. The effects of Ginkgo were generally apparent after three months of treatment and became more pronounced with time.

Atherosclerosis (Hardening of the Arteries): Atherosclerosis is a condition in which cholesterol, calcium, and other substances accumulate on the walls of arteries, blocking the flow of blood (and oxygen) to the tissues downstream. When atherosclerosis affects the legs it causes an ailment known as intermittent claudication. Individuals with intermittent claudication are unable to walk very fast without developing severe pain in their calf muscles, a sign that not enough oxygen is being delivered to their lower legs.

In one study, 79 individuals with intermittent claudication were given either Ginkgo (120 mg/day) or a placebo for six months. Pain reduction in the legs was four times greater in the Ginkgo group that in the placebo group. In addition, those receiving Ginkgo were able to walk significantly
farther without pain than those given the placebo. Laboratory studies showed that, while blood flow in the affected limb decreased slightly in the placebo group, it actually increased significantly in the Ginkgo group.

**Impotence:** Impotence (difficulty achieving or maintaining an erection) is a problem for millions of American men. Doctors classify impotence as either organic (caused by physical factors) or psychogenic (due to psychological problems). In reality, many cases of impotence are due to a combination of physical and emotional difficulties. Because Ginkgo has an effect on both brain function and blood flow (including to the penis) this compound might be especially useful as a treatment for impotence.

Sixty men with impotence who had not responded to conventional treatments received 60 mg/day of Ginkgo for 12 to 18 months. Impotence in blood flow to the penis, documented by sonography, was evident with 6-8 weeks. After 6 months, 50% of the men had regained potency. This study was done by German researchers and published in a respected American journal (the *Journal of Urology*). Sadly, very few American doctors have ever heard of Ginkgo.

**Macular Degeneration:** The macula is an important area of the retina, responsible for central vision and a major contributor to visual acuity. Macular degeneration occurs frequency in people past the age of 65 and is the most common cause of visual decline and blindness among older Americans. In a double-blind study ten patients with age-related macular degeneration, Ginkgo is significantly more effective than a placebo as determined by improvement in long-distance visual acuity.

**Tinnitus (Ringing in the ears):** Tinnitus is an annoying and persistent problem that affects millions of people and hardly ever responds to conventional medical treatment. In a double-blind study, 103 patients with tinnitus received either Ginkgo or a placebo. Marked improvement occurred in 40% of individuals receiving Ginkgo, compared to only 24% of those given the placebo. In our experience, about half of patients that have tried Ginkgo report at least some improvement in their tinnitus. That response rate is gratifying, given that poor results obtained with other treatments.

**Vertigo:** Seventy individuals who had recently developed vertigo were given Ginkgo or a placebo for three months. Compared to the placebo, Ginkgo significantly reduced the frequency, duration, and intensity of the symptoms. After three months, 47% of those receiving Ginkgo were free of symptoms, compared to only 18% of those taking the placebo.

**Asthma:** A compound found in the bloodstream called platelet activating factor is thought to be one of the substances that triggers asthma. Ginkgo is a strong inhibitor of platelet activating factor, and might therefore aid asthma patients. Preliminary studies have shown that Ginkgo does have some value in the treatment of asthma.

**Dosage:** In most of the studies discussed previously, the dosage was 120 mg/day (40 mg, three times a day) of an extract standardized to contain 24% ginkoheterosides, one of the presumed active ingredients. This product is available in most health food stores and the standardization information can be found in the small print on the bottle. Products made from the whole leaf of the Ginkgo tree are probably not as effective as the standardized extract. In some cases, the benefits of Ginkgo are seen as early as a week or two after starting treatment. However, in most cases, Ginkgo must be taken for at least three months before results are noticeable. If you have not seen any benefit after six months, it is not likely that Ginkgo is going to help you.
**Side Effects and Interactions:** Ginkgo is considered nontoxic and only rarely causes minor side effects, such as headache or stomach ache. As far as we know, it does not interact or interfere with any other nutrients or medications. It is not known whether Ginkgo is safe for pregnant and nursing women.

**Conclusion:** A large body of scientific research has shown that Ginkgo is safe and effective for many different medical conditions, some of which are difficult to treat by conventional means. Innovative practitioners in the United States have been prescribing Ginkgo for about eight years, but most doctors are still unaware of this important compound. Perhaps you should educate your doctor about Ginkgo, before he/she become too old to learn about it without the aid of Ginkgo. Remember that Ginkgo is available without prescription in most health food stores.
