

What is “Horny Goat Weed?”

Could there be a better name for a purported aphrodisiac than “Horny Goat Weed?” Well, it’s out there, you can find it in health food stores. Whether it really is an aphrodisiac or not is a different question. What we do know is that the Chinese have been using preparations made from this plant for millennia and claim that it is the real deal. According to the legend, a Chinese goat herder was once puzzled as to why sometimes his animals would engage in incessant sexual activity. Was it something they ate? He monitored the goats’ diet and realized that the formidable activity always followed nibbling on plants he named “yin yang huo” which apparently translates to “licentious goat plant.” That was not quite titillating enough for western supplement manufacturers who rechristened the plant as “horny goat weed.” Actually, it is one of twenty one related plants that come under the genus “Epimedium” which have long been used in Traditional Chinese Medicine for treating fatigue and for boosting the sex drive.

How effective is it? In present day China a water extract of horny goat weed is commonly used as a sexual tonic for both men and women and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest it works. And what does modern science say? In the absence of controlled trials, not much. As any plant, horny goat weed contains dozens of compounds that have potential physiological activity. There are antioxidants like quercetin, flavanols such as icariin and a host of others. Studies in mice have shown an increased testosterone level after administering plant extracts and other rodent trials have shown a decrease in levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that can depress the sex drive. Laboratory experiments have also shown that compounds in horny goat weed interfere with an enzyme that normally degrades acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that has been associated with sexual arousal.

Of course, in a commercial preparation of goat weed, you never really know what you are getting. In many cases it is combined with other substances that have supposed aphrodisiac properties, such as Tribulus terrestris or catuaba bark extract and there may even be some steroids like 4-androstenedione mixed in. Not knowing the exact composition of such products, it is virtually impossible to predict possible risks. There is, however, one report in the medical literature of a cardiac patient who developed a serious irregular heart beat after trying goat weed to boost his failing libido for which he was already taking Viagra. It certainly is possible that the Chinese may be on to something and that Horny Goat Weed may have some benefits for sexual dysfunction but it would be nice to have some human trials with standardized versions. It would probably not be difficult to find volunteers to see if the product really heightens sensitivity, increases desire, enhances blood flow to the genitals and stimulates nerve endings as commercial preparation claim to be able to do.

by Joe Schwarcz