

eWellness magazine

Fabulous Fungi!

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Health

Mushrooms seem like a vegetable, but they're actually the fruit of a fungus. Fungi are often depicted as yucky, or even malignant, in many fairy tales and other children's stories (the witch is always brewing a concoction with toadstools), but some are edible bulbous elixirs that promote good health. Asian cultures have equated mushrooms with immortality, potency, and dancing. Three edible good-for-you species of mushrooms are maitake, reishi, and shiitake, which may show special promise in enriching well-being and pleasing taste buds.



Ancient Wisdom

Certain mushrooms are an important component of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Centuries ago, the Chinese cultivated mushrooms in pursuit of culinary, medicinal, and nutritional value. The maitake, reishi, and shiitake are truly remarkable, showing potential ability to boost immunity, help support the lungs and other organs, and as a potential component of cancer therapy. "These three

types of mushrooms are immunostimulants with anti-tumor and anti-inflammatory properties, which has made them popular supportive therapies for people with cancer, especially those who are undergoing chemotherapy or radiation”, says Michele Collins, MPH, RH (AHG), a trained clinical herbalist in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. “They help stimulate the immune system and enhance its ability to inhibit the production of abnormal and tumor cells.” Japan and China incorporate mushrooms into their diets as a therapy for disease and myriad other ailments. The maitake, reishi, and shiitake are known for offering a variety of therapeutic benefits, each possessing slightly different qualities.



Health Protective Mushrooms

Maitake (*Grifola frondosa*)

Maitake means “dancing mushroom” in Japanese, and this fungus is well known for its flavor and immune enhancing properties in Asia. D-Fraction, a polysaccharide extracted from maitake, “provides potential clinical benefit for patients with cancer,” concludes a study published in *Nutrition*. D- fraction has shown promise as a therapy for cancer and HIV. Maitake holds promising antiviral and anti-tumor properties, works as a potent immune stimulator and may help reduce blood pressure. A study published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food* revealed that, “D-Fraction administration may enhance host defense against foreign pathogens and protect healthy individuals from infectious diseases.”

Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*)

Reishi is the oldest medicinal mushroom, with records dating back more than 4,000 years. In traditional Chinese medicine, reishi is used for a number of ailments including stomach ulcers, depression, bronchial asthma and many other long-term illnesses. “Reishi, whose Chinese name (ling zhi) literally translates as ‘spirit plant,’ is used in cases where there are also symptoms of emotional disturbance such as anxiety, insomnia, or bad dreams,” observes Collins, noting that “reishi is considered a shen (translates as spirit) or heart tonic in traditional Chinese medicine, which means it helps to balance and calm the emotional/conscious mind that resides in the heart.” The dried powder of reishi is recommended as a cancer chemotherapy agent in traditional Chinese medicine, and it is being used worldwide as a dietary supplement. A 2007 study published in International Journal of Oncology revealed “potential of combined effect of green tea and *Ganoderma lucidum* [reishi] on invasive behavior of breast cancer cells.”

Shiitake (*Lentinus edodes*)

Shiitake is known as the “elixir of life” in China, containing lentinan, a polysaccharide showing strong anti-tumor power. Shiitake mushrooms include all eight essential amino acids in higher quantity than meat, soybeans, milk, and eggs, making this mushroom a perfect food for vegetarians and vegans alike. Shiitake contains a cornucopia of vitamins and minerals including A, B12, C, D, niacin, and selenium.



Go Fresh

Gently wipe with a clean, damp cloth or wet paper towel. Remove stems. Rinsing or soaking in water may create a soggy, swelling mushroom. Dried mushrooms are great. Soak dried mushrooms in water for one hour and discard stems. Try whole, dried mushrooms in soups.

Culinary Ideas

Delicious mushrooms are great added to soups, salads, sauces, and pasta and rice dishes. Shiitake and maitake are the most flavorful ones to cook with or eat raw, says Collins. "I consider them to be toxic foods, where, literally, your food is your medicine," she adds. Try these healthy delights and reap the high nutrient, low calorie, and medicinal benefits. Reishi medicinal mushrooms are too bitter for culinary use.

Maitake:

The earthy flavor of maitake tastes great in Italian pasta dishes. Maitake can be sautéed and are excellent for immune boosting soup (miso), in stir-fry, baked, served over rice or salmon. Best used when fresh.

Shiitake:

Try this delightful nugget of health. Toss shiitake into stir-fry dishes; add to vegetarian chili; sauté with onions and garlic or use in meat dishes of your choice. Best fresh but hard to find, fortunately, shiitake's are available canned in some markets.



Buying medicinal mushrooms

Maitake, reishi, and shiitake fungi are available fresh, dried, powdered, tablet form and tea. Located in Asian markets, gourmet stores, natural food stores, and most large grocery stores.

Wellness Precaution

Certain people may be allergic. A couple of groups of people, explains Collins, will want to take precautions before using them. “Because of the stimulating effect on the immune system, people who are taking immunosuppressant medications for autoimmune disorders or who are undergoing organ transplant would want to consult with their doctor first before using any of these mushrooms,” she suggests. It’s important to seek advice from your healthcare provider before starting any diet or supplement regime.

Reishi, the mushroom of immortality” in the Spotlight

The red variety, the most popular of six different colors (the most common type seen in the West is red reishi (*Ganoderma Lucidum*.)

May protect immunity and work as a liver protector. Appears to have possible anti-inflammatory properties, anti-allergy, and anti-cancer effects. (Research indicates that its polysaccharides demonstrate anti-tumor activities.)

Active ingredients in red reishi, triterpenes (called ganoderic acids), may help lower blood pressure and improve circulation.

Has an adaptogenic quality, which means it may help the body fight stress. Can be found in pill form, tea, and liquid extracts. Though available in tea bags, capsule form is most preferred due to the tea's bitter flavor. Follow the manufacturer's label instructions or dose given by a healthcare practitioner.

Side Effects

Maitake

No known safety issues.

Reishi

Although rare, certain people may acquire upset stomach, dizziness, and dry mouth. "Because reishi has been shown to reduce blood clotting and dilate the blood vessels", observes Collins, "people who are undergoing surgery or who are taking blood thinning medications should also consult with their doctor prior to use or ask their doctor to monitor their blood's clotting ability while taking reishi."

Shiitake

In some cases may cause diarrhea.