

Ayurvedic Herbs for Male Reproductive Problems

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There is no doubt that low libido is a serious concern nowadays, as it is made obvious by the increasing amount of erectile dysfunction drugs surfacing on the market. Yet the conventional approach of these drugs tends to focus on suppressing symptoms without looking at the bigger picture and finding the root cause of the problem. Another concern related to male reproductive health is sterility. Ayurveda can certainly help us get a deeper understanding of these complex issues and deal with them in a holistic manner with the use of herbs along with diet and lifestyle guidelines. A unique aspect of this approach is that it is not concerned with just a quick fix, but it is aimed at dealing with the long-term management of these imbalances and at resolving the underlying factors that caused them in the first place.

Low libido can manifest as a lack of sexual energy or desire, as sexual debility or as the inability to perform properly. Symptoms of sexual debility may include lack of interest, erectile weakness, premature ejaculation, nocturnal emission and spermatorrhea, or the involuntary discharge of semen. Male sterility is a condition where the quality or quantity of the semen is low or altogether absent. This problem can easily go undetected, as it doesn't necessarily affect the sexual desire.

All these symptoms are clearly expressing that one of the most powerful energies in the body is depleted, and this can be basically related to factors including lifestyle and dietary choices, habits, level of daily stress, family history, parents' habits, and genetics. To understand how Ayurveda and Ayurvedic herbs can help to promote healthy sexual energy, we need to take a look at how it can become compromised in the first place.

Lifestyle Aspects of Poor Sexual Energy

There are innumerable causes relating to the lack of sexual urges and abilities. These include poor diet and inappropriate food combining, overuse of bitter, astringent, salty, sour or spicy foods, emotional strain, improper fasting, old age, genetic factors, suppression of urges, excessive exercise and bicycling. Other important factors seen in clinical practice associated with low libido are general stress, overwork, substance abuse, improper diet and lifestyle, financial worries and troubled relationships, and using sex as one of the main outlets for stress and tension. Skillfully improving the diet and reducing stress through methods such as regular yoga, meditation, nature walks, and other creative means can help clients respond better to herbal treatment and improve their symptoms faster.

In the case of sterility the same factors can certainly play into the imbalance, although there are other aspects to consider that may not be related to the strength of one's sexual appetite. For instance, Ayurveda recommends that men avoid over heating the testicles with excessively hot baths and prolonged use of sauna (without protecting with a cool, damp cloth), as well as wearing tight underwear and sitting all day, especially with the legs together on a chair. Too much heating tastes like salty, sour and pungent can also over heat the body, as well as over consumption of marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol. It has also been observed that extensive use of extremely bitter herbs like neem can decrease the sperm count and the libido.

Other Causative Factors of Poor Sexual Energy

If a couple has been actively trying to conceive for over a year without results, it may be helpful to check with a doctor to rule out other possible causes of male sterility, such as varicocele, a *pitta* related condition caused by increased blood flow and temperature around the testicles and vas deferens, or hydrocele, a *kapha* related disorder where excess fluid builds up around the testicles. Other causes may include chronic infection of the prostate, endocrine disorders, anatomical defects causing retrograde ejaculation, and pharmaceutical drugs.

Dhatu and Doshas Involved

From an Ayurvedic perspective, male sexual energy arises from *shukra dhatu*, the male reproductive tissue. Within this *dhatu* lays the great potential energy for procreation as well as the fuel for mental focus, concentration, and creativity. Since *shukra* is the last of all bodily tissues to become fully nourished through the process of digestion, it makes good sense to consider how the diet affects the overall reproductive health. Better eating habits that include stimulating and digestive herbs such as fennel, cumin, fenugreek, and cardamom can greatly contribute to the nourishment of *shukra dhatu*.

If there is a high level of *ama* (toxins) present in the system, then some degree of cleansing may also be indicated before addressing the rejuvenation of the reproductive tissue directly. Even *ashwagandha*, one of Ayurveda's best reproductive herbs can still fall short if there are too many obstacles in its way.

An important consideration in the treatment of poor reproductive health is the role of the *doshas* in its causative factors. Low sexual energy is often associated with an aggravation of *vata dosha*. *Vata's* dry, light, cold, rough, erratic, and astringent qualities are opposite to that of *shukra*, which tends to be more *kapha*-like in nature. Here a warming tonic herb such as *ashwagandha* is the best to increase the quality and quantity of *shukra*.

Excess *pitta* can also play into the picture due to its hot and sharp qualities, which can overheat and burn *shukra* and even cause burning upon ejaculation. In this case, cooling herbs like *shatavari* or *bala* are good choices to nourish, cool and protect this delicate tissue.

Kapha predominant individuals tend to be the least prone to sterility, but can often experience symptoms of low or obstructed sexual energy and fluids, often associated with conditions such as obesity, congestive disorders, mental dullness and lethargy. In some cases *kapha* types produce excess *shukra*, which tends to accumulate as unstable, unripe *dhatu* and can cause preoccupation with sexual desire. Since many tonic herbs are heavy, sweet and oily (and tend to diminish *agni* and increase *ama*), they may aggravate *kapha*, so it's best to combine them with light, warming and stimulating herbs such as ginger, cardamom, fenugreek and *pippali*.

Ayurvedic Vajikarana and Shukrala Herbs

Once any possible causes and contributing factors have been determined, as well as the *prakruti* and *vikruti* of the person, then the best herbs and supportive measures can be selected to suit the individual needs. In Ayurvedic pharmacology there is a special group of *rasayana* herbs, classified as *vajikarana*, that help to nourish and stimulate the sexual organs and tissues, as well as to

promote beauty and sex appeal. Further classifications of herbs that aid in increasing spermatogenesis are referred to as *shukrala*.

In Sanskrit *vaji* means “horse” and *karana* means “power,” to convey the idea of the power or strength of a horse. The closest common Western term for herbs in this category would be aphrodisiacs. Yet because *vajikarana* herbs nourish the reproductive tissue, they also help to increase *ojas*, which is the essence of all bodily tissues that can be transformed into spiritual energy.

Vajikarana herbs can act as stimulants, tonics or both. Stimulants are typically heating and *rajasic* like damiana, fenugreek garlic, and onion. They help to decrease *kapha* and have more of an invigorating action on the sexual organs. Tonics, whether warming or cooling, are more nourishing and help to restore the overall quality and quantity of the tissues. Some herbs possess both stimulating and rejuvenating properties, such as *shilajit*, garlic, fenugreek, and *ashwagandha*.

Common Ayurvedic Tonic Herbs For Male Reproductive Health

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)

In Sanskrit, *ashwagandha* means “the smell of a horse,” due to the strong odor of the fresh root, which resembles that of horse urine. It is also considered to bestow the sexual vitality of a horse and is often used in cases of sterility and infertility. Being one of the best male rejuvenating tonic herbs, it promotes spermatogenesis, blood flow and tone to the reproductive organs and regulates hormonal function. It is commonly used to relieve conditions such as spermatorrhea, impotence, premature ejaculation, nocturnal emission and enlarged prostate.

Its grounding and deeply nourishing qualities make it one of the best *vata* pacifying medicines. Due to its warming energy, it can provoke *pitta* when used in excess. This is especially true when prepared as a tincture, although the powdered herb used in combination with cooling *vajikarana* herbs such as *shatavari*, *bala*, licorice or *vidari* is fairly neutral. *Ashwagandha* has anabolic properties and increases the tone and strength of the muscles. Because it helps to combat stress, relax the body and mind, and fortify all the *dhatu*s, it is a perfect herb for targeting many of the contributing factors associated with depleted sexual energy.

In my experience it is a fairly gentle herb with a wide range of uses and one of the most common *vata pratyani*ka herbs. Some key signs and symptoms to look for when considering this herb are generalized low libido, stress, low mental or physical energy, depletion, insomnia, hyperactivity, nervousness, anxiety, worry and depression.

One of the most effective and simple ways to use this herb is to boil 1 teaspoon of the powdered root in a cup of raw unhomogenized cow’s milk for several minutes, sweeten with raw sugar or honey and take before going to bed or first thing in the morning. Those who don’t drink milk can use fresh almond milk or just plain hot water. I personally use this herb in formulation or along with other compounds more than just by itself for most conditions.

It is commonly used in combination with *shilajit* in male tonic formulas, which should be used with caution by *pitta* and *vata* folks or those with excess heat in the body. If *kapha* is involved in the

imbalance, then it is best used along with stimulating spices such as *pippali*, ginger, cardamom, or fenugreek.

Ashwagandha plays a key role in several traditional compounds that are quite useful to enhance virility, including *Ashwagandhadi churna* and *Ashwagandhadi lehya*, a tasty herbal jam that is taken twice daily in doses of 1 to 2 teaspoons along with warm milk or water. Also, *ashwagandharishta*, an herbal wine preparation that is great for sexual debility as well as afflictions of the mind and nervous system, in doses of 20 to 30 ml twice daily. A moderate dose of the powdered herb ranges from 2 to 6 grams, 2 to 3 times daily.

Due to its *sattwic* quality, *ashwagandha* has long been used by the yogis of India to increase *shukralarthava dhatu* and transform it into *ojas*, thus promoting spiritual energy and enhancing meditative power. Since mental rejuvenation is vital for overall health, *ashwagandha* is also one of the most valuable *medhya rasayana* herbs in Ayurveda, and it combines well with other *medhya rasayana* herbs such as *brahmi* (gotu kola or *bacopa monniera*), *shanka pushpi* and *vacha*.

Kapikacchu (*Mucuna pruriens*)

This is perhaps one of my personal favorite *vajikarana* herbs for men, second to *ashwagandha*, which is its frequent partner in male supportive formulas. It has a sweet and bitter taste, and is quite heavy and oily. When used in moderation it is fairly tridoshic but is mainly used to balance *vata* and *pitta*, as it increases *kapha* and *ama* in excess.

Kapikacchu is often used along with *gokshura* for the treatment of spermatorrhea and as a potent aphrodisiac when prepared with other rejuvenating substances, including milk, ghee and honey. A simple milk decoction with these ingredients can serve as an alternative to some of the more elaborate preparations mentioned in the classic texts for increasing the sexual vigor and potency. Combined with diuretics like *punarnava* and *gokshura*, it is very effective in the treatment of enlarged prostate and edema. It also helps to buffer stress when used along with other *vata* balancing herbs like *bala*, *ashwagandha* and *jatamansi*. Typical doses of the powdered herb range from 1.5 to 6 grams. One should avoid it in cases of aggravated *pitta* or high *ama*, unless it is well formulated.

Shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*)

Although best known as one of the most important rejuvenating herbs for the female reproductive system, *shatavari* can also serve as a powerful male tonic. It has a bittersweet taste, is cooling and purifying to the liver and blood, and it helps to target *pitta* at its main site in the small intestine. When treating male sterility, *shatavari* is useful to balance heating herbs and foods that are commonly used to improve sperm count like *ashwagandha*, garlic and onion.

It prevents excess *pitta* from burning and depleting the sperm and, due to its heavy, moistening and nourishing properties, it is also a useful herb for *vata*, especially when combined with other *vajikaranas* like *ashwagandha* or *bala*. In much the same way as *ashwagandha*, it can be prepared as a milk decoction in doses of 3 to 6 grams, or taken alone or in combination with other appropriate herbs.

For addressing any emotional components that may be associated with libido issues, *shatavari* combines well with cooling nervine herbs like *brahmi* (gotu kola) and skullcap for *pitta* related emotions like anger and irritability. If there is more nervousness, worry or anxiety, then it is best combined with calming and grounding herbs like *jatamansi*, *ashwagandha*, or *tagara*. When there is a need for *shatavari* but there is a concern with excess *kapha* or *ama*, then it is best mixed with warming herbs like *pippali* or ginger.

Because the state of the digestion is of vital importance in restoring and maintaining health, it is good to note that *shatavari* is also one of the best herbs for balancing *pitta* in its main sites, the small intestine. It is used to reduce acidity and inflammation, sooth mucous membranes, and promote elimination due to its mild laxative and cooling diuretic properties.

Shatavari is clearly one of best *pitta pratyaniika* herbs and can serve as a chief herb in formulas for many *pitta* and *pitta-vata* related conditions. Some good indicators for using *shatavari* include general fatigue, low sexual energy, stress, irritability, inflammation, hyperacidity, urinary tract infections, and burning sensations. A typical dose of *shatavari* is 2 to 6 grams of the powdered herb, 2 to 3 times daily. One should avoid taking this herb in cases of high *kapha* and *ama*, or respiratory or sinus congestion.

Since the Ayurvedic approach is very individualized and holistic, the herbs selected for a formula and their proportions will vary depending upon the individuals needs. So let's say an individual with a *pitta* predominant constitution presents symptoms of low libido, as well as other complaints such as heartburn, sharp appetite, hypoglycemia, sustained irritability, redness of the eyes and loose stools. Here a formula could use 4 parts *shatavari* to support the *pitta prakruti* and *vikruti*, rejuvenate and protect the reproductive tissues, relieve excess hot and sour qualities of *pitta* in the stomach, and calm and even neutralize the digestive fire. A supporting herb like *vidari* could also be added in 3 parts to bolster the sexual and physical energy, further balance *pitta* in the blood, liver, and GI track, and to help to bulk the stool. To calm the mind, 3 parts gotu kola could be added. Last but not least, 2 parts licorice to help to relieve symptoms of hypoglycemia, support sexual energy and relieve *pitta* in the intestines and harmonize the formula overall. Such a compound could be taken in doses of 1/2 to 1 tsp. hot or cold infusion, 2 to 3 times daily.

Bala (*Sida cordifolia*)

Bala means "strength" in Sanskrit, and it is one of the best rejuvenative tonic herbs for *vata* and *pitta*. It has a sweet taste, heavy and oily qualities, which may increase *kapha* when used in excess, and is mildly cooling. As most true *rasayana* herbs, it nourishes and strengthens all the bodily tissues, especially the plasma, muscle, nerve, marrow and reproductive tissue. Being one of the best anti-*vata* herbs in Ayurveda, it helps to correct disorders related to deficiency of the body and mind. It plays a leading role in the treatment of *balakshaya* or chronic fatigue, and can be used when there is exhausted physical or mental strength.

Bala has a tonifying action upon both the male and female reproductive systems, promotes spermatogenesis and fertility, and is very effective in restoring sexual stamina.

Taken internally as well as massaging *bala* oil or *ashwagandha bala tailam* onto the penis can significantly improve its tone and help prevent premature ejaculation. For supporting the health of

the prostate gland it can be combined with herbs such as *gokshura*, saw palmetto, *ashwagandha*, *vidari kandha* and *kapikacchu*. A typical dose ranges from 2 to 6 grams, 2 to 3 times daily.

Vidari kandha (*Ipomoea digitata*)

This starchy tuber is effective in promoting spermatogenesis and works fast when taken as a milk decoction. It is fairly tridoshic when used in moderation and, like *ashwagandha*, it is lighter for *kapha* types than *shatavari* and *bala*. To treat enlarged prostate it can be combined with *kapikacchu* or saw palmetto.

It is sweet and cooling, and it promotes *ojas* and muscle tone and coordination. *Vidari* is useful for sexual debility associated with nervous tension and adrenal stress. Here it can be used in formulation with herbs including Siberian ginseng, *gokshura*, licorice and *ashwagandha*.

The uses of this herb far extend this brief overview, but it is worth mentioning that it is a good alternative if *shatavari* is either too cooling or heavy, or when *ashwagandha* may be too warming. It falls right between the two and is of great value as both a *vata* and *pitta pratyani* herb. A typical dose ranges from 2 to 6 grams, 2 to 3 times daily.

Shilajit (*Asphaltum*, mineral pitch)

Shilajit increases virility and sexual stamina, while maintaining the normal tone of the genital organs. Many *vajikarana* herbs have an anabolic effect and increase *kapha*, whereas *shilajit* with its pungent taste and heating energy invigorates, stimulates and scrapes excess *kapha* from the body.

In the case of *kapha* constitutions or *kapha* related reproductive imbalances, it is commonly combined with *ashwagandha*. It can also be used with diuretics such as *punarnava* to further reduce *kapha* via the kidneys, or warming stimulants that improve digestion, burn *ama* and refresh the mind and senses, like *ajwan*, ginger, *pippali* or the compound *trikatu*. For enlarged prostate, it combines well with *gokshuradi guggulu*, *ashwagandha*, saw palmetto, *punarnava* or *vidhari*.

I recommend using *shilajit* with other herbs or traditional preparations in doses from 250 to 500 mg twice daily. Precaution should be taken when using *shilajit* in cases of high *pitta* or *vata* due to its heating and scraping action, and during pregnancy.

Pippali (*Piper longum*)

With the exception of *shilajit*, most of the herbs mentioned in this article tend to increase *kapha*, so *pippali* makes a nice addition to formulas containing these herbs, since it is a rejuvenating herb with a warming, stimulating and *kapha* reducing action.

Pippali is heating, but its oily quality prevents it from becoming too drying to *vata* and its sweet post digestive effect makes it more *pitta* friendly than other hot spices and herbs when used in small amounts. Combined with *ashwagandha*, it helps to promote blood flow to the reproductive organs.

The primary ways we receive *prana* is through our breath, water and food. *Pippali* increases *prana agni*, thus raising the life energy and expelling impurities via the breath. It also kindles *jathara* and *dhatu agni*, and improves digestion, absorption and assimilation. Thus it is a key herb for rejuvenation and is used for a wide variety of digestive, respiratory and arthritic disorders. The typical dosage is 1 to 3 parts in complex formulas, or 250 mg to 1.5 grams. One should avoid using *pippali* in high *pitta* or inflammatory conditions.

Choosing the Right Herbs

When selecting *vajikarana* herbs to best suit an individual's needs it is helpful to first gather as much knowledge regarding the person's *prakruti* and *vikruti*, as well as the characteristics of their condition, the involvement of *doshas*, tissues, channels and organs, qualitative characteristics of the condition, medical history, contributing factors, strength of digestion, and levels of *ama* present, as well as their emotional state. This can certainly help to develop a strategy for selecting herbs that will resonate best with the client.

For instance, *ashwagandha* targets *vata* at its root and is famous for bolstering sexual energy, but how? By relieving stress, improving muscle tone, calming the mind and nerves, promoting sound sleep, replenishing adrenal energy and stimulating blood flow. There is no wonder how such an herb is perfect for pacifying *vata* at many levels and how it might support sexual and reproductive health on many levels.

Understanding the dynamic properties of herbs in the light of Ayurvedic principles can help us to choose relatively small amount of herbs to cover the most ground possible. Sometimes even just one herb, if it is well suited to the individual, can be very effective. Another important point to keep in mind is that many rejuvenating tonic herbs are heavy, oily, and hard to digest for those with low *agni* or high *ama*. Some individuals will develop gas, bloating or even constipation from such herbs. Here it is important to strengthen *agni* and cleanse *ama* before giving heavy herbs, or to combine them with light, warming and stimulating herbs like cardamom, ginger or *pippali* to make them easier to digest. Alcohol extracts and Ayurvedic medicated wines (*arishtas* and *asavas*) like *ashwagandharishta* or *balarishta* can help to lighten the properties of sweet, heavy and oily herbs a bit and make them easier to digest because they enter almost immediately into the blood stream.

Cultivating Our Sexual Energy

It is natural for our sex drive to diminish as a result of the aging process, but we can conserve our vital energy and retain our sexual capacities by maintaining a balanced diet and lifestyle, and by taking *vajikarana* herbs and foods. When choosing herbs to deal with male concerns, it is important to be aware of the various factors that may be contributing to the imbalance in the first place and eliminate those obstacles, whether emotional, dietary, or otherwise.

From a yogic perspective, sexual energy is a powerful force that can be redirected to fuel spiritual practices. It is worth noting that the lack of sexual desire is not always an indicator of low sexual energy, but may also be a sign of spiritual development and contentment.

Moderating sex to once or twice a month can be a powerful way to prevent depletion of reproductive fluids and to allow the body ample time to replenish *shukra dhatu*. Observing restraint

along with *pranayama* (yogic breathing), *asana* (postures) and a *sattvic* (pure) diet, can help to breed contentment in the mind and increase *ojas*, the vital life essence, which is the by-product of *shukra*.

Conserving energy, both sexually and otherwise, can help maintain health and promote immunity, healing and peace of mind. This includes pacing ourselves in our daily life, decreasing stress factors, and taking time out to rest, relax and play, as well as giving ourselves time alone or in nature to reflect on how we feel deep inside and resolve any emotional issues. This along with an appropriate diet and the support of Ayurvedic herbs and healthy routines can most certainly uproot any male reproductive health concerns.

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