

HEALTH

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TCM

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Lingzhi

The *reishi* mushroom (*Canoderma lucidum*) has recently become known as a medicinal fungus worldwide.

Like other herbs, it goes by different names. In China, it's called *lingzhi*. The word *ling* means spirit or mind, while *zhi* refers to mushrooms in general. *Reishi* is its name in Japan. It's also sometimes referred to as the mushroom of immortality or the mushroom of spiritual potency. It may also be called the mushroom of legends because of the rich folklore surrounding it.

Lingzhi is an auspicious symbol of long life to the Chinese, who believe *lingzhi* was once a goddess called Yaoji, a daughter of Yandi. Although Yandi was the god of medicine, he could not save the life of his youngest, most beautiful daughter, and he buried her in the Wu mountains. There, she absorbed the energies of the sun and the moon and turned herself into the divine *lingzhi*.

In another legend, the hero Houyi shot down nine suns with his bow, leaving the last to light the world. The Emperor of Heaven appreciated what he did for the people, and awarded Houyi the elixir of immortality. When his wife, Chenge, found

out the secret of the mushroom, she stole and ate it.

She felt her body becoming lighter until she floated up to Heaven's Palace, where the angry Emperor of Heaven banished her to the moon for eternity. This story illustrates the feelings of the Chinese towards the *lingzhi* as a treasure derived from a god.

Li Shizhen, a renowned traditional Chinese medicine doctor, was the first to record *reishi* in the *Compendium of Materia Medica (Bencao Gangmu)* during the Ming dynasty. *Reishi* was described as being able to "keep our body light, prevent ageing and make one live long".

But what are the functions of *reishi* in TCM? Practitioners may prescribe *reishi* to calm the mind, enrich vital energy (*chi*) and blood, eliminate phlegm, or to relieve a cough or shortness of breath.

Scientists have discovered the chemical compounds of *reishi*

are complex, with most of them still unclear. Preliminary research suggests some of its biological activity may be due to the polysaccharides and triterpenoids contained in it.

Polysaccharides are said to contribute to anti-tumour effects, lowering blood sugar levels and modulating the immune system. The triterpenoids may provide liver protection and induce cell-death in cancer cells.

Although these studies are preliminary, they emphasise the potential of this mushroom as a health maintenance agent. The *lingzhi* or *reishi* mushroom is most commonly sold in a health supplement form and can be found in most chemists.

This mushroom is also used in Chinese cooking and can be found in dried form in most herbal shops. One soup recipe to calm the mind is as follows.

Ingredients

5gm of *lingzhi* (the fruiting body)
100gm of lean pork

Method

Wash the *lingzhi* and chop into bite-size pieces. Place it in a pot with the lean pork and cover with water; double boil for 40 minutes. Season with salt to taste. Effects are best felt when the soup is taken once a day for 10 days.

Rose Tse and Angela Collingwood are editors for Shen-Nong, a subsidiary of Integrated Chinese Medicine. Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner