



## Don't count on aphrodisiacs

Around Valentine's Day, there seems to be an increase in e-mail spam promoting love potions. Of particular interest are the ads related to herbal aphrodisiacs such as Nexcite (formally known as Niagara) and Ignite (not to be confused with Ignite Plus -- a weight-loss product).

**Question:** Do these products work and are they safe?

**Answer:** A person might be curious about the seemingly magical ingredients. We've described the herbal ingredients below, along with their known biological functions and our relatively non-scientific interpretation of how they may or may not work. We are also including known potential side effects. Then you be the judge.

Nexcite contains five herbs: damiana, schizandra, ginseng, guarana and maté. Ignite contains Tribulus terrestris and an extract from Avena sativa, also known as oats. These seven plants are purported to enhance potency or desire.

Both products are contraindicated for children and women who are pregnant or lactating. And, as with drugs, some individuals can be hypersensitive to the components.

Damiana has a tradition of use as an aphrodisiac and an antidepressant. Though scientific support for these effects is lacking, preventing depression has an obvious benefit to enhancing the amorous moment. Possible adverse reactions include hallucinations, confusion, nausea, urethral irritation and liver toxicity in high doses.

Schizandra is used in Chinese medicine to treat some respiratory, liver and kidney disorders. Again, when a person feels ill, there is likely a decreased libido. Possible adverse reactions include depression of the central nervous system, nausea and vomiting.

Ginseng has many purported uses, including increased endurance and decreased fatigue. Adverse reactions can include hypertension,

chest pain, palpitations, anxiety and insomnia.

Maté and guarana, caffeine-containing herbs, certainly can help prevent your partner from falling asleep. Possible side effects include hypertension, palpitations, heart rhythm problems, headache, anxiety and restlessness.

The first Ignite ingredient, Tribulus terrestris, is also known as bullhead or puncture vine because of its sharp stickers. Its extract has been purported to affect testosterone production. It is also known to cause facial eczema and photosensitivity in sheep and is toxic to livestock when consumed in quantity.

The Avena sativa (oats) in Ignite may function best as an aphrodisiac in the form of bales used in a hay ride. Of course oat bran can help prevent constipation, a condition obviously not conducive to a warm and fuzzy mood.

Overall, the best aphrodisiac is the presence of your lover.

---

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D., C.N.S. and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D., C.N.S.  
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,  
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.  
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service