Superfoods Fact Sheet
Chaga Mushroom
(Inonotus obliquus)

Part Used: Fungal ‘conk’ or growth

Called the ‘King of the Medicinal Mushrooms’ chaga is a parasitic/symbiotic fungus which grows on birch trees throughout North America, Eastern Europe and Asia, and is much prized for its powerful healing properties – indeed it is said to be the most powerful healing fungus on earth.

The fungus grows in unison with the tree, and absorbs some of the tree’s nutrient. The growth is irregularly formed and generally looks rather like burned charcoal. It is not a fruiting body, but a dense, sterile mass of mycelia, and when chopped from the tree the inside of it has a rusty, yellow-grown colour, sometimes mottled with whitish or cream-coloured veins.

Typically it is found on trees over 40 years of age, but it begins life as an infection and is some years before the characteristic black mass is seen. After around 3 – 5 years it can be harvested, and will usually regrow, and can continue to be harvested until such times as the tree dies.

History and Traditional Uses

There is evidence that chaga has been in use for thousands upon thousands of years dating back to at least 3,300 BC by Stone Age Man.

In 2696 BC medicinal mushrooms, including chaga were recorded as being ‘Gifts from the Gods’ and a thousand years before Christ chaga was in widespread use throughout Asia, being used to balance energy and boost immunity.

In the 15th century we have its usage documented in Russian folklore and was introduced to the West by the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his book The Cancer Ward.

By 1955 chaga had been approved by the Russian Medical Academy of Science for immune support and its various uses as a folk remedy continue to be researched and give credence to its folklore.

As well as its many recorded medicinal uses, from fighting
inflammatory disease, yeast and fungal infections and disease to an external treatment for skin, in Finland large chaga ‘conks’ were cored and dried and made into shaman’s drums, and it also has a history of usage as a clothing dye and as a fire-starter to help keep a fire alight.

Health Benefits

Chaga mushroom has a variety of beneficial properties which rightly uphold its place as ‘King of the Mushrooms’.

It is an adaptogen, helping the body to adapt and cope at times of stress, bringing it back into balance, as well as being a potent immune-system modulator, a cancer fighter and anti-tumour agent, a gastric tonifier, has geno-protective properties is reputed to be a longevity tonic and is alkaline.

Cancer

Chaga has long been used in Russia for its anticancer properties and have been approved for public use against cancer by the Medical Academy of Science in Moscow. To date chaga has been shown to help cancers of the bone, brain, breast, cervix, colon, leukemia, liver, lung, ovaries, stomach, uterus, hepatoma, melanoma, medulloblastoma, neuroblastoma and sarcoma.

It everyday language for many cancers chaga would seem to be able to stop or slow cancerous growth and possibly stop the spread of metastasis.

Traditional chaga anti-cancer diets are restricted to milk products and vegetables, allowing chaga to purify the blood and regenerate affected organs, and is undertaken for 3 – 5 months. At least 8 cups of tea and a chaga tincture needs to be taken daily. Chaga enemas can also be used. As a preventative the tea is drunk daily, minimum of 1 – 2 cups.

Immune Booster

Chaga is a superb immune modulator. Its immune enhancing nutrients revitalize white blood cells, strengthening immune function. One of the most well studies compounds in chaga is a polysaccharide known as beta glucans which is recognised as potentiating a powerful immune response and accounts for the many health benefits found with chaga, as it nourishes and strengthens our natural immune cells to fight and destroy mutated or sick cells.

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2 Acta Pol. Pharm. 67 no 4: 397-406 ‘separation of aqueous extract inonotus obliquus (chaga)’
3 World J Gastroenterol 14, no 4 (Jan 28 2008): 511-17 ‘Chaga mushroom induces G0/G1 arrest and apoptosis in human hepatoma HepG2 cells’
5 Life Sciences 70, no 1 (May 30 2006): 72-80 ‘Anti-cancer effect and structural characterization of endo-β-polysaccharide from cultivated mycelia on Inonotus obliquus’.
Other Benefits:
There are so many recorded benefits for chaga that it is potentially a very long list. Here are some:
- Helps fight allergies
- Improves asthma
- Improves core vitality
- Analgesic and anodyne (soothes pain)
- Antibacterial and Anti-inflammatory
- Helps hyperglycaemia, balances blood sugars
- Protects fats from oxidation
- Anti-mutagenic, anti-parasitic, anti-tumour, anti-viral, anti-bacterial
- Blood purifier
- Cardio-protective
- Fights bronchitis
- Improves circulation
- Liver purifier and detoxifier
- Gives intestinal protection – especially good for colitis, gastritis, digestive inflammation
- Aids the pineal gland
- Beneficial to the nervous system
- Beauty aid for skin
- Helps longevity

Nutritional Value
Chaga has an amazing nutritional profile and amongst the highlights are its powerful antioxidants, most of which are water soluble and therefore accessible by being extracted in hot water.

Chaga is one of the best natural sources of the super-antioxidant SOD (Superoxide dismutase), containing 25 – 50 times more than other medicinal mushrooms. Other healing nutrients include polysaccharides, polyphenols, sterols, inotodiols, triterpenoidal saponins, melanin, botulin/betulinic acid, and lupeol.

It also is rich in the minerals calcium, cesium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, rubidium, silicon, sulphur, selenium, zinc, copper, germanium, manganese, chromium, boron, antimony, barium, bismuth as well as containing good levels of vitamins B2 and D2, dietary fibre, amino acid complexes and beneficial enzymes.
How To Use

If you are lucky enough to find some chaga and wild harvest it, you will need to dry it for us. This is best done by breaking it into smallish chunks and using a dehydrator.

Chaga can be bought as chunks, ground or as a powder. It can be taken in capsule form, bought as ready prepared tea bags and also as a tincture. All forms are beneficial.

To make chaga tea use chaga that has been ground to a very fine powder and stir the powder into hot water until it dissolves. You can even add in raw honey which helps to drive the medicinal properties of the chaga deeper. This is a great pick-me-up.

To make a latte version add in ¼ to ½ tsp cinnamon and stir in coconut milk, using a frother to create foam on top.