

got Guggul?

By Joe Cannon, MS, CSCS

If I could dust off my crystal ball and look into the future, I'd predict that many of you who are now scratching your heads wondering what guggul is, will be reading a lot more about it in the coming months.

Guggul (pronounced like google) refers to the tree sap resin that comes from the small mukul myrrh tree that grows in India. Myrrh has long been valued for its usefulness in making incense and perfume and given as a present on special occasions. For example, those familiar with the Bible's Book of Matthew know that the Three Wise Men gave baby Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh as presents.

Guggul has a long history of medicinal use, where it has figured prominently in Ayurvedic practices to treat a number of conditions. One use fast becoming popular in the U.S., is its application as a possible natural alternative to cholesterol-lowering drugs. Because of guggul's growing popularity and because it has been seriously looked at by the scientific community, let's review the major claims for guggul and see if we can determine who it may be right for.

CAN GUGGUL LOWER CHOLESTEROL?

Guggulsterones, the active ingredients in guggul appear to inhibit the manufacture of cholesterol and reduce C-reactive protein levels, which is a marker for heart disease. Some reports have noted that 100 mg guggulsterones used over the course of several weeks can lower cholesterol and triglycerides by as much as twenty percent, while a recent U.S. study conducted found that guggul was not only ineffective at lowering cholesterol, but that it might slightly elevate LDL (bad cholesterol). These conflicting results could be due to several problems, such as differences in food preferences among test subjects, the overall design of the research as well as to the inaccuracies between the amount of active ingredients listed on the label of the product and the amount that is actually contained in the supplement. Nevertheless, this one study notwithstanding, most of the research on guggul to date finds that it may be effective.

Some evidence suggests that the cholesterol-lowering prop-



erties of guggul may in fact be due to the actions of two specific types of guggulsterones, referred to as E and Z. Thus, supplements may be standardized according to the concentration of E and Z guggulsterones they contain. It should be remembered that like all natural products, guggul is in fact composed of many different elements and the E and Z guggulsterones may rely on these other elements to function properly. Supplements may also be standardized according to the percent of total guggulsterones they contain (without regard to E or Z forms). Those who wish to try guggul are encouraged to have their cholesterol levels checked before and after starting this supplement to see how it is working. After this information is known, you and your doctor can make an informed decision as to whether guggul is right for you.

THE SKINNY ON GUGGUL AND WEIGHT LOSS

A few studies suggest that guggul stimulates the elevation of thyroid hormone, which helps regulate metabolism. Metabolism can be thought of as the speed that we burn calories. So, the question is, could elevations in thyroid hormone brought about by guggul supplementation lead to weight loss? This is an interesting theory, but one for the moment that has limited evidence. It is not known how guggul stacks up against diet and exercise to achieve weight loss. In other words, is it better, worse or the same? This combined with the lack of good evidence in humans probably makes guggul a crapshoot at this point. People considering trying guggul to improve their existing thyroid problems should check with their doctor first because it is speculated that guggul may interact with medications used to treat hypothyroidism.

CAN GUGGUL HELP ARTHRITIS?

As was mentioned above, there is some evidence that guggul may reduce levels of C-reactive protein. C-reactive protein is an indicator of inflammation, which increases in the body during some disease states including arthritis. Therefore, by lowering C-reactive protein levels, guggul may exert anti-inflammatory properties and help those suffering with arthritis.

Currently, little evidence hints that guggul may help with osteoarthritis, but many questions still need to be answered and the lack of human research on this topic makes drawing conclusions difficult. So, for the moment it is not known how effective guggul is for arthritis. It should be remembered that arthritis actually refers to over 100 different conditions. It has been my experience that many people with arthritis do not know which type they have. Because of this and because many with arthritis are likely to be taking medications for other conditions, I feel it's prudent to consult your physician before using guggul.

DOES GUGGUL HAVE ANY SIDE EFFECTS?

Guggul has been used for centuries by Ayurvedic physicians and is usually not reported to have serious side effects in healthy people. While not often mentioned on many websites that sell guggul, you should know that there is speculation that guggul might interact with a variety of medications including some used to treat cancer and high blood pressure. In addition, guggul may interact with drugs used by those with an underac-

tive thyroid. Guggul's drug interactions have not yet been well studied in the U.S. which makes it difficult to determine who it is right for. Because of this, it's always a good idea to run your intent to use guggul by your health-care provider first.



Joe Cannon, MS, CSCS, NSCA-CPT, is an exercise physiologist, personal trainer, and health educator. He is the

author of Nutritional Supplements: What Works and Why. A Review from A to Zinc and Beyond, which evaluates the claims and evidence for over 100 popular supplements. Joe certifies personal trainers both locally and nationally via AAAI/ISMA, has written for several publications and has been a content consultant for Dateline NBC. For more information visit Joe's official website, www.Joe-Cannon.com