



# The Next Magic Pill?

The lowdown on *Rhodiola rosea*.

**What it is:** An herb native to certain Arctic and Alpine regions, *Rhodiola rosea* has been prized since ancient times. Capsules of dried root extract are now widely available.

**Why the buzz:** Sufferers of depression, stress-related disorders, cancer, and other fatigue-inducing ailments (and people who are just run-down) claim that *Rhodiola* boosts their spirits, energy stores, and mental clarity. And Richard P. Brown, MD,

associate professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University and coauthor of *The Rhodiola Revolution*, says there are anecdotal reports that *Rhodiola* heightens sexual desire in both sexes, and that one open study found it helps men suffering from premature ejaculation.

**The science:** In rats, the herb stimulates neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin (human mood elevators) and dampens activation of the brain's stress-response system, which may be why users feel more relaxed and optimistic. Large-scale U.S. investigations are pending, but a 2000 Armenian study of 56 physicians on night duty showed that *Rhodiola*

reduced symptoms of mental fatigue. Participants receiving a low daily dose of 170 milligrams performed better than those in a control group on tests measuring functions like associative thinking, short-term memory, calculation, and concentration skills.

An earlier study by a group of Russian researchers looked at 128 adult patients and showed that the herb reduced or eliminated symptoms like fatigue, irritability, and weakness in 64 percent of their subjects. As yet, there's little research to back up claims that *Rhodiola* helps with premature ejaculation, impotence, or sexual desire.

**The drawbacks:** Although

no serious side effects have been reported, Brown warns that the herb could intensify mood swings in people with bipolar disorder. And since it's a stimulant, it can keep you awake if you take it at night. But Fredi Kronenberg, PhD, director of Columbia University's Rosenthal Center for Complementary & Alternative Medicine, notes that more U.S.-based, large-scale studies are needed to determine how *Rhodiola* works and which ailments it's best for.

**Should you take it?**

"*Rhodiola* can be extremely beneficial for people with low energy," Brown says, "but make sure you talk to a knowledgeable doctor before using it." —ELIZABETH SVOBODA