



## **Maca: Peru's natural viagra**

*By Chris Kilham*

The South American country of Perú is home to numerous beneficial plants, including Peruvian maca root, a legendary sex-enhancing root passed down from the Inca. I'd heard about Peruvian maca herb and extract for years. Peruvian maca root has been dubbed "Peruvian ginseng," even though it bears no relation to ginseng. But like ginseng, the maca plant is employed into a Peruvian maca extract to increase strength, energy, stamina, libido and sexual function, a winning combination of health benefits if there ever was one.

To investigate maca's health benefits and understand the role that maca plays in Peruvian culture, my wife and I headed down to Peru to explore the maca trail. In the process we met with maca traders, growers and scientists, and came back tremendously impressed by this plant, which is now available as a supplement in U.S. health food stores.

### **What is Maca?**

Maca, *Lepidium meyenii*, is an annual plant which produces a radish-like root. The root of maca is typically dried and stored, and will easily keep for seven years. The plant is cultivated in the Junin plateau of Peru's Central Highlands, and was highly revered by the Inca.

During the height of the Incan empire, legend has it that Incan warriors would consume maca before entering into battle. This would make them fiercely strong. But after conquering a city the Incan soldiers were prohibited from using maca, to protect the conquered women from their powerful sexual impulses. Thus as far back as 500 years ago, maca's reputation for enhancing strength, libido and fertility was already well established in Peru.

Today, maca's popularity is very much on the increase, as people discover that the plant really does boost libido, sexual function and overall energy. Acreage in Peru dedicated to Maca cultivation is increasing every year to meet demand, and a number of scientists have turned their attention to the properties of the root. In Peru, maca is used by men and by women who want to put more fire into their sex lives. And in the U.S., Europe and Japan, dietary supplements containing maca are gaining ardent devotees.

### **Maca Nutrition**

What natural ingredients in maca promote its reputed sex-enhancing effects? In-depth analysis of maca conducted in 1998 by Dr. Qun Yi Zheng and his colleagues at PureWorld Botanicals shows that maca contains about 10 percent protein, almost 60 percent carbohydrate, and an assortment of fatty acids. These ingredients are common and nothing special. But the investigators also discovered two groups of novel compounds, the macamides and the macaenes. These agents are believed to be directly responsible for maca's sex-boosting powers.

To test this idea, researchers conducted a series of controlled animal experiments, the results of which were published in the April 2000 issue of the medical journal *Urology*.

Rodents fed MacaPure extract, which contains a concentration of macamides and macaenes, demonstrated greatly increased energy and stamina. The animals also exhibited a striking increase in sexual activity as compared with non-maca-fed animals, or those fed lesser amounts of macamides and macaenes. So how does this translate to humans? Individuals who consume maca also get sexual results. Men and women with low libido feel a boost in sexual desire, and men with erectile problems notice marked improvement in sexual function.

### **Maca Use in Peru**

In Peru, maca is a food. At the Third Annual Maca Festival in Churin, Peru, we sampled numerous products made with the sex-enhancing root. Peruvians make cookies, cakes, hot porridge, chips and blender drinks with maca root, which has a pleasant flavor similar to graham flour.

At several booths, women were making maca blender drinks. Maca roots soaked in jars of water, and the tables were laden with all the ingredients for a drink. The typical shake includes a couple of soaked maca roots and a little bit of the soak water, a handful of fresh papaya (trucked up from the warm lowlands), some condensed milk, an egg, honey and vanilla, all put together with vigor and smiles. I asked a number of people why they used maca, but one woman stands out in my mind. She smiled at my question and replied, "Well, for the sex, of course."

### **Doctors Comment on Maca**

Users aren't the only ones making comments about maca. The root and its extracts are used in medical practice in Peru. In the November 1988 *Townsend Letter for Doctors*, physicians were quoted regarding the therapeutic and salutary uses of maca. Doctor Hugo Malaspina, M.D., a cardiologist practicing complementary medicine in Lima, Peru, has been using maca in his practice for 10 years.

Malaspina first found out about maca through a group of sexually active older men who were taking the herb with good results. "One of this group started taking maca and found he was able to perform satisfactorily in a sexual relationship with a lady friend. Soon everyone in the group began drinking the powdered maca as a beverage and enjoying the boost that the root was giving their hormonal functions. I have several of these men as patients, and their improvement prompted me to find out more about maca and begin recommending it to my other patients."

Another Peruvian physician, Doctor Aguila Calderon, M.D., is the former dean of the Faculty of Human Medicine at the National University of Federico Villarreal in Lima. Doctor Calderon uses maca for male impotence, erectile dysfunction, menopausal symptoms and general fatigue, and claims good results.

Arizona physician Gary Gordon, M.D., former president of the American College for Advancement in Medicine, is also a maca supporter. "We all hear rumors about various products like maca. But using this Peruvian root myself, I personally experienced a significant improvement in erectile tissue response. I call it nature's answer to Viagra.

What I see in maca is a means of normalizing our steroid hormones like testosterone, progesterone and estrogen. Therefore it has the facility to forestall the hormonal changes

of aging. It acts on men to restore them to a healthy functional status in which they experience a more active libido."

### **How Much Maca Should You Take?**

Keep in mind that maca is a food, and is not used in tiny quantities. Most supplement companies that are selling maca are putting about 500 milligrams of ground, dried maca in each capsule. Some recommend three capsules daily, some six.

I believe that many people think of herbs like drugs, and assume that small amounts will do some good. In most cases, that's not true. As a rule, consumers take too little of most herbs to derive the benefits those herbs can impart. Rare is the herb that works in small doses. And many herbal product labels offer dosage recommendations based not on efficacy, but on price.

To be consistent with Peruvian use you'd take a minimum of six to ten 500-milligram capsules of powdered maca daily, equal to 3,000 to 5,000 milligrams of maca. You can certainly take more. You can also obtain powdered maca root under some brands. With those products, you can toss a tablespoon full into a blender drink every day and enjoy maca the way the Peruvians do.

MacaPure, which is a standardized, concentrated extract of maca, is a different story. Companies selling MacaPure are recommending one 450-milligram capsule of MacaPure extract twice daily, equal to 900 milligrams of MacaPure extract. I personally think that four to five capsules (between 1,800 and 2,250 milligrams) daily is the right range.

The more maca or maca extract you consume, the more benefit you are likely to get. In toxicity studies conducted in the U.S., maca showed absolutely no toxicity and no adverse pharmacologic effects. In animal studies, the more maca animals consume, the stronger and more sexually active they become. You can be generous with the amounts of maca products you take. With maca, you have a safe, effective, nontoxic way to significantly boost your sexual function, without the hazards of prescription drugs.

*[Editor's note: While natural herbs can have many positive effects on your health, including restoring or improving your sex drive, you should discuss the use of specific herbs with your doctor. Most herbs are safe on their own but your doctor can help you know if they can have potential adverse interactions with other medications you may be taking or other health conditions you have.]*

<http://health.discovery.com/centers/sex/libido/maca.html>