

Asparagus

Asparagus, AKA ‘Sparrow Grass’ AKA “Aspar Grass” gets its English name from the Latin, which got it from the Greek, which in turn came from the Persian “Asparag” meaning shoot or sprout. As demonstrated by the journey its name has been on, it has an extremely rich history both as a food and a medicine. Widely cultivated for its tender, succulent, edible shoots, asparagus cultivation in fact began more than 2,000 years ago in the eastern Mediterranean region. There is even a recipe for cooking this member of the lily family in the oldest surviving book of recipes, Apicius’s third century AD Classic.

Asparagus has been also used from very early times as a medicine, owing to its obvious diuretic properties. So obvious that Marcel Proust claimed that asparagus transformed his chamber-pot into “a flask of perfume.” Many may disagree with Marcel however, for within a half-hour of asparagus consumption, some people notice their urine has acquired a very pungent odor, which is often compared to rotten eggs. Furthermore, studies conducted on the "asparagus urine" phenomenon have found that not everyone can actually smell the smell in urine even if it is there. The frequency of this inability to smell the odor is high, with tests having shown that 90% of an Israeli population and 75% of a Chinese population do not have the ability to smell Asparagus in the urine at all.

Believe it or not, this is relevant in an understanding of its medicinal uses at home. Scientists are still not entirely sure which set of chemicals or amino acids contained in asparagus actually cause the phenomenon, but one of the compounds is called asparagusic acid which is thought to break down into methyl mercaptan, which is the same chemical which gives a skunk its defensive smell. One theory suggests that asparagus breaks down quickly in the body and an enzyme releases methyl mercaptan, which eventually goes through the kidneys and is excreted as a waste product in the urine. This smell is then considered to be a good sign, as it proves that the asparagus eater's kidneys are functioning well. According to further studies, not everybody actually produces this characteristic smell in their urine, and it seems that only about 40% of the UK population produce smelly urine after eating asparagus based on tests on almost 1,000 people.

The interesting thing about asparagusic acid, is that it has been shown to kill parasites, as it protects the asparagus plant against them naturally. This finally leads us to its use in traditional medicine. As you can by now imagine the herb is used medically for conditions of the Kidneys and Urinary tract. These include

1. cystitis and kidney disease
2. edema

3. rheumatism and gout

4. edema from heart failure*

A broad range of asparagus types are used around the world, with the root being preferred in Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine. The shoots by themselves probably do not have the same effects reported in these texts, as they are not even of the same plant. To obtain a general prophylactic effect simply include Asparagus in your regular diet. To treat any of the above conditions, first consult your health care provider, then gently boil the shoots in water for 15 minutes, allow to stand and drink 3 – 4 glasses per day. As with all vegetables however, if you want the best results, ALWAYS buy organic!

- The Barefoot Doctor

** Asparagus contains a constituent used in preventing small capillary blood vessels from rupturing and is thus used for heart problems.*