Hi Alice,

Could you please tell me what royal jelly is? What are the benefits and side effects of taking it?

Thanks! Polly

Answer

Dear Polly,

Royal jelly sounds like a condiment fit for a queen – and that’s not too far from the truth! This noble substance is actually the food reserved for queen bees and their larvae legacy. Royal jelly is secreted from the glands of devoted worker bees and fed to bee larvae. After a few days, the larvae that have potential to develop into queens continue to be fed this sweet nectar. Since queen bees are much bigger, live longer, and are more fertile than all the other bees, this substance is believed by some to impart mystical qualities. In reality, royal jelly is comprised of mostly B vitamins, 60 to 70 percent water, 12 to 15 percent protein, 10 to 16 percent sugars, and 3 to 6 percent fats, with salts, free amino acids, and other vitamins making up the rest. While consumption may have its benefits, this regal jam can also have some not-so-stately side effects.

What's all the buzz about royal jelly? In addition to its use as a general health tonic, people take royal jelly for a number of reasons, including:

- Slowing the signs of aging
- Using it as an anti-inflammatory agent
- Stimulating hair growth
- Improving sexual performance and sperm production
- Reducing symptoms of menopause
- Healing bone fractures
- Lowering cholesterol and blood pressure
- Preventing arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and cancer
- Alleviating cardiovascular ailments
- Remedying liver disease, pancreatitis, insomnia, fatigue, ulcers, and digestive and skin disorders

Whew. What a list! Unfortunately, there is limited evidence to substantiate any of these purported health benefits because few studies have been done on the health benefits of royal
jelly on humans. In one of few human trials, royal jelly was found to increase conception rates among couples with known male asthenozoospermia (reduced sperm motility). In another, an increase in erythropoiesis (the production of red blood cells) and improvements of glucose tolerance and mental health was found as a result of royal jelly consumption. More research is needed to uncover and confirm other possible health benefits or concerns.

Now that you now know about the purported and potential benefits, what are the possible concerns? People who are allergic to bees and honey and those who have asthma can face real dangers if they try royal jelly. Reactions ranging from bronchial spasms, skin irritations, and asthma attacks, to more severe anaphylactic shock, and even death, have been reported due to ingestion by those folks. In addition, royal jelly has the potential to stimulate growth of some breast cancer cells if consumed by someone with estrogen receptor-positive breast cancer. It might also increase the effects of blood thinners (a type of medication) and cholesterol-lowering medications. Other reported side effects include weight gain, facial rash, and gastrointestinal discomfort. To be on the safe side, it’s also recommended that pregnant and breastfeeding women, small children, and those with compromised immune systems refrain from using royal jelly. And as with all supplements [2], if you’re interested in trying this out yourself, it may be best to talk with your health care provider to see if it’s right for you.

Alice!

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Medical Services (CUMC) [13]

Published date:
Aug 09, 2002
Last reviewed on:
Jul 10, 2015

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  - Comments & Corrections