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AHP Responds to Claims of Ashwagandha Abortifacient Effects

In May of 2020, Danish Food Authorities issued a risk assessment of ashwagandha recommending against its use due to purported abortifacient activity. Other European countries followed, calling for independent risk assessments that have called into question the safety of the herb when used in pregnancy. As their primary reference, the Danish authorities cited an ashwagandha monograph of the World Health Organization (WHO) (2009) that in turn cited the American Herbal Pharmacopoeia (AHP) *Ashwagandha Root Monograph and Therapeutic Compendium* (2000). However, the WHO monograph, in an example of what is known in medical literature as *citation distortion*, did not fully articulate the AHP review which stated the following:

“There are conflicting reports regarding the use of ashwagandha in pregnancy. Large but undefined doses have been reported to possess abortifacient activity (Chadha 1976; Svoboda 1992). Of several ayurvedic practitioners consulted, none reported having observed an abortifacient activity clinically. Conversely, ashwagandha has, traditionally and in modern ayurvedic practice, been used to prevent miscarriage and stabilize the fetus (Tirtha 1998).”

Misrepresentation of the AHP monograph has been repeatedly uncritically resulting in the misconception that ashwagandha root is potentially unsafe. A potential for an abortifacient effect was similarly reported in the first edition of the *Botanical Safety Handbook* (BSH; McGuffin et al. 1997), which provides a safety classification for ashwagandha of 2b: Not to be used in pregnancy unless otherwise recommended by a qualified health care practitioner, and a “Notice” as an abortifacient. The 2b classification remained in the second edition of BSH but the Notice as an abortifacient was removed due to the lack of documentation that such an action existed.

Since the earlier publications of both AHP and BSH, a comprehensive review of the traditional and scientific literature and all accessible citations that made any mention of ashwagandha as an abortifacient was conducted. Additionally, the opinion of experienced Ayurvedic medicine practitioners from India and North America was solicited. Neither the Expert Advisory Council for the revision of BSH (third edition), nor experts involved in the AHP revision, found any traditional or scientific documentation that ashwagandha possesses an abortifacient activity. The earlier cautions regarding the use of ashwagandha in pregnancy and its claimed use as an abortifacient were based on anecdotal reports from the ethnobotanical literature that provided no indication such an effect was evident. Furthermore, when such reports were made, the overwhelming majority referred to above-ground parts, which in Ayurveda were rarely used internally, not the root, the portion used almost exclusively. Similarly, a review of the traditional and scientific data reveals no pharmacological mechanisms that would indicate an abortifacient effect.

The BSH safety classification was revised to the current safety classification of 1: Herbs that can be safely consumed when used appropriately. An upcoming revision of the AHP *Monograph and Therapeutic Compendium* will reflect this as well.

In addition, subsequent to safety concerns raised in the European Union, the Ministry of AYUSH (Government of India) released a Safety Dossier (2.0; 2024) noting the lack of abortifacient activity of ashwagandha root and citing all clinical and pre-clinical data that have investigated the use of ashwagandha and its preparations in pregnancy. One toxicity investigation in rats demonstrated a No Observed Adverse Effect Level of ashwagandha root extract of 2,000 mg/kg. The available human trials reported no maternal or fetal toxicity in pregnant women using ashwagandha preparations. No other clinical or pre-clinical investigations revealed an abortifacient activity.

While adequate caution when using any substance during pregnancy is warranted, based on a critical and comprehensive review of the traditional and modern literature, as well as the opinion of the majority of experts, there is no evidence of an abortifacient effect of ashwagandha root.

For more information regarding this press release contact:

Roy Upton, President
American Herbal Pharmacopoeia
roy@herbal-ahp.org
[1-831-461-6317](tel:1-831-461-6317)

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CONTACT US

American Herbal Pharmacopoeia®
PO Box 66809, Scotts Valley, CA. 95067

Email: ahp@herbal-ahp.org
Website: www.herbal-ahp.org
Call Us: 831-461-6318
Fax: 831-438-2196

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