

# *Ferula asafoetida*: Traditional uses and pharmacological activity

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Submitted: 15-03-2011

Revised: 02-04-2011

Published: 23-08-2012

## ABSTRACT

*Ferula asafoetida* is herbaceous plant of the umbelliferae family. It is oleo gum resin obtained from the rhizome and root of plant. This spice is used as a digestive aid, in food as a condiment and in pickles. It is used in modern herbalism in the treatment of hysteria, some nervous conditions, bronchitis, asthma and whooping cough. It was at one time employed in the treatment of infantile pneumonia and flatulent colic. The gum resin is antispasmodic, carminative, expectorant, laxative, and sedative. The volatile oil in the gum is eliminated through the lungs, making this an excellent treatment for asthma. The odor of asafoetida is imparted to the breath, secretions, flatus, and gastric eructations. Its properties are antispasmodic, expectorant, stimulant, emmenagogue and vermifuge. Asafoetida has also been used as a sedative. It also thins the blood and lowers blood pressure. It is widely used in India in food and as a medicine in Indian systems of medicine like ayurveda. Asafoetida has been held in great esteem among indigenous medicines, particularly in Unani system from the earliest times.

**Key words:** *Ferula asafoetida*, spice, umbelliferae

## INTRODUCTION

Plants have been a constant source of drugs and recently, much emphasis has been placed on finding novel therapeutic agents from medicinal plants. Today many people prefer to use medicinal plants rather than chemical drugs. *Ferula asafoetida* Linn: Asafoetida, the gum resin prized as a condiment in India and Iran, is obtained chiefly from plant *Ferula asafoetida*. The Latin name ferula means “carrier” or “vehicle”. Asa is a latinized form of Farsi asa “resin”, and Latin foetidus means “smelling, fetid”. In ancient Rome, asafoetida was stored in jars together with pine nuts, which were alone used to flavor delicate dishes. Another method is dissolving asafoetida in hot oil and adding the oil drop by drop to the food. If used with sufficient moderation, asafoetida enhances mushroom and vegetable dishes, but can also

be used to give fried or barbecued meat a unique flavor. Ancient texts describe it as hingu and several centuries of its constant use have bestowed upon it the peculiarity of a tempting spice and trusted medicine. Hing is bitter and pungent in taste and light, sharp, unctuous and hot in effect. Ayurvedic texts have categorized hing as deepniya and sanjna-sthapaka (an appetiser and a restorer of consciousness). It is popular household remedies and its components are used for many prescriptions in traditional healing.<sup>[1]</sup> Asafoetida is used as a flavoring agent and forms a constituent of many spice mixtures. It is used to flavor, curries, meatballs, dal and pickles. The whole plant is used as a fresh vegetable. The herb is also used as an antidote of opium. Given in the same quantity as opium ingested by the patient, it will counteract the effect of the drug.

## MYTHS AND HISTORY

As its name suggests, asafoetida has a fetid smell and a nauseating taste; characteristics that also burdened it with the name devil's dung. In the middle Ages, a small piece of the gum was worn around the neck to ward off diseases such as colds and fevers. Whatever effectiveness it had was probably due to the antisocial properties of the amulet rather than any medicinal virtue. Surprisingly, in Persia asafoetida was used as a condiment and called the “food of the gods”. This herb is the major component in the famous Ayurvedic herbal formula Hingashak, Sanskrit name is hing. In Persia this herb is so highly esteemed as a condiment, it is mixed with almost all their dishes. French gastronomers rub a little asafoetida on hot plates from which

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10.4103/0973-7847.99948