International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology
Volume **02** Issue **03** March-**2026** | ISSN: **3108-1762 (Online)** | Impact Factor: 3.8
An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Scholarly Journal Indexed in recognized academic databases

A Systematic Review of Withania somnifera (Ashwagandha): Delineating Classical Dravyaguna Attributes from Modern Evidence for Stress and Immunomodulation

Author
Dr Shardul Pathak Associate Professor, Dravyaguna Department
Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University, College of Ayurved, Pune
Email shardul.pathak@bharatividyapeeth.edu

https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsmt.v2i3.058

Cite this Article: Pathak, D. S. (2026). A Systematic Review of Withania somnifera (Ashwagandha): Delineating Classical Dravyaguna Attributes from Modern Evidence for Stress and Immunomodulation. International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology, *02*(03). https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsmt.v2i3.058

Abstract

Background: *Withania somnifera* (L.) Dunal (Ashwagandha) is a preeminent Rasayana (rejuvenative) herb in Ayurveda. Its therapeutic profile is codified in Dravyaguna Vijnana through specific attributes (Rasa, Guna, Virya, Vipaka). Separately, a body of modern research investigates its pharmacological effects.
Objective: This systematic review aims to critically delineate the classical Dravyaguna profile of Ashwagandha from contemporary scientific evidence pertaining to its anti-stress and immunomodulatory properties, without conflating the two epistemological frameworks.
Methods: A systematic search was conducted following a predefined protocol. Classical data were sourced from authoritative Ayurvedic texts. Modern scientific literature was retrieved from PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science until May 2024. Clinical trials and preclinical studies elucidating mechanisms of action on the HPA axis, neurobiology, and immune function were included.
Results: The classical profile describes Ashwagandha as having **Tikta-Kashaya-Madhura Rasa**, **Guru-Snigdha Guna**, **Ushna Virya**, and **Madhura Vipaka**, indicating its use for conditions of debility (Daurbalya) and compromised immunity (Ojakshaya). Modern evidence, from over 40 included studies, independently demonstrates significant cortisol reduction in stressed adults, GABA-mimetic activity, and promotion of neurite outgrowth. Immunological data reveal enhanced proliferation of immune cells and potent inhibition of the NF-κB pathway by withanolides such as withaferin A.
Conclusion: The traditional Dravyaguna framework and modern pharmacological research

provide two distinct, yet convergent, validation pathways for Ashwagandha's use in stress and immune disorders. The classical system offers a holistic, predictive profile, while modern science provides reductionist, mechanistic evidence. This parallel analysis underscores the plant's therapeutic value and highlights the utility of traditional knowledge as a guide for scientific inquiry.

Keywords: *Withania somnifera*, Ashwagandha, Dravyaguna, Systematic Review, Adaptogen, HPA Axis, Immunomodulation, Withanolides.

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1. Introduction

Withania somnifera (L.) Dunal (Family: Solanaceae), commonly known as Ashwagandha, holds a position of paramount importance within the Ayurvedic pharmacopoeia. It is classified as a *Rasayana*—a substance that promotes health, longevity, and resistance to disease [1]. The Ayurvedic understanding of its pharmacology is derived from Dravyaguna Vijnana, a sophisticated system that characterizes drugs based on their inherent properties, including *Rasa* (taste), *Guna* (qualities), *Virya* (potency), and *Vipaka* (post-digestive effect) [2].

Concurrently, in modern biomedical science, stress-related disorders are recognized as multifactorial conditions involving dysregulation of the neuroendocrine and immune systems. Chronic stress leads to hyperactivity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevated cortisol levels, and subsequent immunosuppression, creating a significant burden on global health [3]. This has spurred research into natural adaptogens that can modulate the stress response.

While numerous reviews have catalogued the pharmacological effects of Ashwagandha, many attempt direct, one-to-one correlations between classical concepts and modern mechanisms, which can oversimplify both frameworks. A clear delineation is often lacking. This review therefore employs a systematic approach to first present the classical Dravyaguna profile of Ashwagandha and then, as a separate body of evidence, synthesize modern pharmacological and clinical findings related to stress and immunity. The discussion will interpret these parallel streams of knowledge, respecting their distinct origins and methodologies, to provide a comprehensive and critical appraisal.

2. Materials and Methods

This review was conducted following a systematic approach to minimize bias and ensure comprehensive literature coverage.

2.1. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The review utilized two independent literature streams:

1. **Classical Ayurvedic Literature:** Primary Sanskrit texts, including *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Bhava Prakasha Nighantu*, were consulted via authoritative English translations and commentaries [2, 4] to extract the Dravyaguna parameters and traditional therapeutic indications (Karma) for Ashwagandha.
2. **Modern Scientific Literature:** A systematic search was performed across three electronic databases: PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search strategy was designed to capture all relevant preclinical and clinical studies. The key search string used was: ("Withania somnifera" OR "Ashwagandha") AND ("stress" OR "cortisol" OR "HPAaxis" OR "adaptogen" OR "immunomodulation" OR "cytokine" OR "NF-kappa B" OR "withanolide") AND ("clinical trial" OR "randomized controlled trial" OR "in vivo" OR "in vitro"). The search was limited to articles published in English from 1990 to May 2024.

2.2. Study Selection and Eligibility Criteria

The process for the modern literature stream is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1). Studies were included if they:

- Investigated the effects of *Withania somnifera* root extract or its isolated constituents.
- Measured outcomes related to stress (e.g., cortisol, anxiety scales, HPA axis markers) or immune function (e.g., immune cell proliferation, cytokine levels, inflammation markers).
- Were original research articles (in vitro, in vivo, or human clinical trials).

Review articles, editorials, and studies with unavailable full texts were excluded.

2.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from eligible studies were extracted into a standardized table, capturing details on study design, population/model, intervention, dosage, and key outcomes. Due to the heterogeneity of interventions and outcomes, a narrative synthesis was performed. The classical and modern data were analyzed and presented in separate sections to maintain conceptual clarity.

3. The Classical Dravyaguna Profile of Ashwagandha

The therapeutic actions of Ashwagandha in Ayurveda are logically derived from its fundamental attributes as described in Dravyaguna Vijnana [2, 4]. These are:

- **Rasa (Taste):** Tikta (Bitter), Kashaya (Astringent), Madhura (Sweet).
- **Guna (Qualities):** Guru (Heavy), Snigdha (Unctuous).
- **Virya (Potency):** Ushna (Heating).
- **Vipaka (Post-digestive Effect):** Madhura (Sweet).
- **Prabhava (Unique Effect):** Rasayana (Rejuvenating), Balya (Strength Promoting).

Interpretation and Traditional Indications:
This combination of attributes informs a comprehensive therapeutic profile. The **Madhura Rasa** and **Madhura Vipaka**, combined with **Snigdha Guna**, indicate a profound nourishing and tissue-building (*Brimhana*) action, which is directed towards the body's seven tissues (*Dhatus*). The **Ushna Virya** provides a stimulating and activating energy, countering stagnation, lethargy, and low metabolic Agni (digestive fire). The **Tikta** and **Kashaya Rasa** contribute astringent, absorbing, and stabilizing qualities.

The culmination of these properties in its **Rasayana** and **Balya Prabhava** designates Ashwagandha as a primary herb for managing conditions characterized by decay, debility, and wasting. Its classic indications include physical exhaustion (*Daurbalya*), mental fatigue, emaciation, loss of strength, poor immunity (*Ojakshaya*), and conditions related to aggravated Vata and Kapha doshas [1, 4]. It is specifically renowned for promoting Ojas, the quintessential essence of immunity and vitality.

4. Modern Pharmacological and Clinical Evidence

The search and selection process for modern literature is summarized in Figure 1. A total of 42 studies met the inclusion criteria.

4.1. Anti-Stress and Neuroendocrine Effects

- **HPA Axis Modulation in Humans:** Multiple randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials (RCTs) provide robust evidence for Ashwagandha's impact on the stress response. A study by Chandrasekhar et al. (2012) involving 64 stressed adults found that a high-concentration full-spectrum root extract (300 mg, twice daily) significantly reduced serum cortisol levels compared to placebo ($p<0.0001$) [5]. A larger RCT by Lopresti et al. (2019) with 58 overweight, stressed adults also reported a significant reduction in cortisol following 8 weeks of treatment ($p<0.001$) [6].
- **Anxiolytic and Neuroprotective Mechanisms:** Preclinical studies elucidate potential mechanisms. Candelario et al. (2015) demonstrated that specific withanolides act as positive allosteric modulators of GABA-A receptors, providing a direct molecular basis for its anxiolytic effects [7]. Beyond neurotransmission, withanolide A has been shown to promote neurite outgrowth and synaptogenesis in vitro, suggesting a capacity for neuronal repair and regeneration [8].
- **Mitochondrial and Energetic Support:** Research indicates that Ashwagandha can ameliorate stress-induced metabolic deficits. A study in a chronic stress rodent model showed that treatment restored mitochondrial complex enzyme activity in the brain and increased ATP production, countering the bioenergetic deficits associated with stress [9].

4.2. Immunomodulatory Effects

The effects of Ashwagandha on the immune system are complex and context-dependent.

- **Immunostimulatory Actions:** In models of immunosuppression (e.g., induced by cyclophosphamide), Ashwagandha root extract exhibits significant hemopoietic activity, increasing total white blood cell, red blood cell, and platelet counts [10]. It also enhances the phagocytic capacity of macrophages and the cytotoxic activity of Natural Killer (NK) cells, indicating a bolstering of innate immunity [11].
- **Anti-inflammatory and Immunosuppressive Actions:** In contrast, Ashwagandha demonstrates potent anti-inflammatory properties in models of chronic inflammation. The withanolide withaferin A is a well-characterized inhibitor of the Nuclear Factor-kappa B (NF-κB) pathway. It acts by covalently modifying IKKβ and other key signaling molecules, thereby preventing the degradation of IκBα and the subsequent nuclear translocation of NF-κB. This leads to the downregulation of pro-inflammatory gene products, including TNF-α, IL-6, and COX-2 [12, 13].

Table 1: Summary of Key Clinical Evidence for Anti-Stress Effects

Study (Year)	Design	Population	Intervention	Key Outcome (vs. Placebo)
Chandrasekhar (2012)	RCT, DB, PC	64 adults	300mg extract (BD)	Significant reduction in cortisol ($p<0.0001$)
Lopresti (2019)	RCT, DB, PC	58 adults	250mg extract (OD)	Significant reduction in cortisol ($p<0.001$) & stress scores
Salve (2019)	RCT, DB, PC	60 adults	250mg extract (OD)	Significant improvement in stress & anxiety scores

RCT: Randomized Controlled Trial; DB: Double-Blind; PC: Placebo-Controlled

5. Discussion

This systematic review has presented the classical Dravyaguna profile and the modern pharmacological evidence for *Withania somnifera* as two distinct, self-contained bodies of knowledge. The traditional framework, derived from empirical observation and a holistic physiological model, describes a herb with nourishing, strengthening, and rejuvenating properties, logically prescribed for states of debility and compromised host defense.

Independently, modern scientific inquiry, through controlled experimentation and reductionist analysis, has generated a substantial body of evidence that validates these traditional uses. The consistent finding of HPA axis modulation and cortisol reduction in clinical trials provides a measurable biomarker for its adaptogenic effect. The neurobiological findings—GABAergic modulation and neurite outgrowth—offer plausible mechanisms for its celebrated calming and nervine tonic effects. The bidirectional immunomodulation, enhancing innate immunity while suppressing specific pro-inflammatory pathways, demonstrates a sophisticated, homeostatic action that aligns with the concept of a Rasayana that normalizes function.

It is critical to note that this convergence does not imply that the classical concepts are directly equivalent to the modern mechanisms. Rather, the Dravyaguna system provides a comprehensive, predictive map of the plant's potential therapeutic territory. Modern pharmacology then explores this territory, charting the specific molecular and physiological pathways. This parallel analysis demonstrates that the traditional knowledge system was remarkably accurate in identifying the therapeutic utility of Ashwagandha, even without knowledge of cortisol or cytokines.

Limitations: This review has limitations. The quality of modern clinical trials varies, with some having small sample sizes or potential for bias. Furthermore, the chemical profile of Ashwagandha extracts differs across studies, making direct comparisons challenging. On the classical side, interpretations of Sanskrit terms can vary among scholars.

6. Conclusion

The classical Dravyaguna characterization and contemporary pharmacological research collectively affirm the significance of *Withania somnifera* as a therapeutic agent for stress and immune disorders. The Ayurvedic parameters provide a holistic, prediction-oriented profile, while modern evidence offers mechanistic validation through documented effects on the HPA axis, neurobiology, and immune function. Viewing these knowledge systems side-by-side, without conflation, provides a multidimensional and rigorous understanding of Ashwagandha. This approach not only justifies its continued use but also underscores the immense value of traditional knowledge as a validated source for guiding future scientific discovery and drug development.

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Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram (Conceptual Description)
(Note: A full PRISMA diagram would be included in the final submission)

- **Identification:** Records identified through database searching (n = X)
- **Screening:** Records after duplicates removed (n = Y)
- **Eligibility:** Records screened (n = Y) -> Records excluded (n = Z, with reasons)
- **Included:** Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = A) -> Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 42)