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## A leafy herb may fight the ills of altitude

"PEOPLE NEED TO LEARN how to acclimatize properly," says American Alpine Club medical committee chairman Franklin Hubbell. "If not, they're ignoring what a hundred years of climbing has taught us: You can't cheat death, taxes, or altitude." But now, thanks to a \$7.99 herb on the shelf at every right-thinking grocery store, you may be able to haggle a bit.

The wonder plant? *Ginkgo biloba*. In clinical trials held in April, climbers taking the supplement were half as likely to experience acute mountain sickness as those taking a placebo. Peter Hackett, president of the International Society of Mountain Medicine and colleagues Kirsten Maakestad, a physician at St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, Colorado, and Gig Leadbetter, professor of exercise science at Mesa State College (also in Grand Junction), co-authored the study of the leafy-tree derivative commonly prescribed by homeopaths as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease. "I don't think it's a miracle drug—people still got sick—but it's particularly good for slow ascents," says Hackett.

Half of the 40 college students participating in the team's trials swallowed two 60-milligram ginkgo tablets twice a day, starting five days before ascending Colorado's 14,110-foot Pike's Peak, while the other half took placebos. After ascending 7,000 feet in two hours (no, they aren't superhuman—they drove) and spending the night, only 33 percent of those on ginkgo had symptoms of mountain sickness, while 68 percent of the control group experienced nausea, headaches, lack of appetite, or dizziness.

The findings, presented this month in Park City, Utah, at the annual Wilderness Medicine Society conference, could come as welcome relief to those who take Diamox, currently the most widely used mountain-sickness medication. The drug's side-effects, which include frequent urination and a possible allergic reaction, turn many climbers off. While fully half of those attempting Alaska's Mount McKinley develop some signs of altitude sickness (according to a 1998 study published in *American Family Physician*), Hackett estimates that only one-third carry Diamox and fewer still actually use it.

Ginkgo may be just the ticket, but not all mountaineers are rushing to the supermarket. Eric Simonson, the leader of last year's Mallory-Irvine Research Expedition, has had "no experience with the ginkgo stuff." But that may change soon. Hackett's research confirms similar findings from a 1996 French study, and at press time, University of Hawaii researchers were repeating his team's experiment on 13,796-foot Mauna Kea. Even if the results are promising, it may take some time before the climbing

## Hot Summer Sidetrips

The ESPN X-Games may be "krankin" in San Francisco in August, but you needn't turn to the tube for a shot or two of sweat and adrenaline. After all, we are in the throes of deepest summer. Time to run—run!—and commune with mud, whitewater, rock, and sundry like-minded souls. So turn off the devil box, load up the rack, and scratch gravel. The road awaits. —**MARIA SUDEKUM FISHER**

## Haleiwa Surf & Sea Cup

Got pecs? Try **Oahu's** one-mile, out-and-back **North Shore swim from Haleiwa Beach Park to Puena Point**. Scarf down free croissants and mangoes afterward. August 5. Info: 808-739-2112 or [www.calendar.gohawaii.com](http://www.calendar.gohawaii.com).

## Carolina Outdoors Sea Kayak Race

Kayak-surfing lessons, demos, clinics, and races off **Nags Head, North Carolina**—where the breakers are beefy and the water is warm. August 6. Info: 252-441-4124 or [www.kittyhawk.com](http://www.kittyhawk.com).

## Beast 2000

Cheer on the lunatics who'll trek, climb, and mountain-bike 300 miles over the Alaska Range while "pulking," or pulling, their gear in sleds (no dogs allowed) in this, the self-styled world championship of

community endorses a 200-million-year-old herb. "These things rarely pan out for us mountaineers," says Todd Burleson, owner of Alpine Ascents International. "But if Pete's saying it's reality, then it definitely means a lot." —**MARY CATHERINE O'CONNOR**

adventure races, near **Mentasta Lake, Alaska**. August 7 to 17. Info: 757-425-2445 or [www.oarbeast.com/beast2000](http://www.oarbeast.com/beast2000).

#### **Gore Canyon Festival**

Encompassing the Teva Whitewater Cup, this is hydraulic mayhem—races, clinics, demos—designed for just about any raft, Shredder, or kayak. **Gore Canyon, Colorado**. August 18 and 19. Info: 970-923-3955 or [www.rapidpulse.net](http://www.rapidpulse.net).

*Patrick*

#### **The wild and woolly Gore Canyon, CO**

#### **Pedro's Mountain-Bike Festival**

Bring your own wheels or borrow demo models from the nation's top builders and ride like the wind at this, the Woodstock of mountain biking in **Lanesboro, Massachusetts**. August 18 to 20. Info: 781-871-9824 or [www.pedrosfest.com](http://www.pedrosfest.com).

#### **EAR TO THE GROUND**

***"Base camp is a micro-city. You've got loony-tunes and whatever."***

**—Himalayan climber Ed Viesturs, speculating on why reporter Finn-Olaf Jones felt he needed to be airlifted out of Everest base camp to Kathmandu on May 22 for his own safety. After writing on Discovery.com that his outfitter, Scotsman Henry Todd, was an "Everest caterer...who hasn't even been to the summit," Todd chased Jones over the moraine until he fell and scraped himself up. Though eyewitness accounts vary, Todd reportedly either shook Jones or hit him, and then politely told him to get out of camp. The helicopter evac cost about \$4,000.**

*Illustration: Rick Sealock*

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