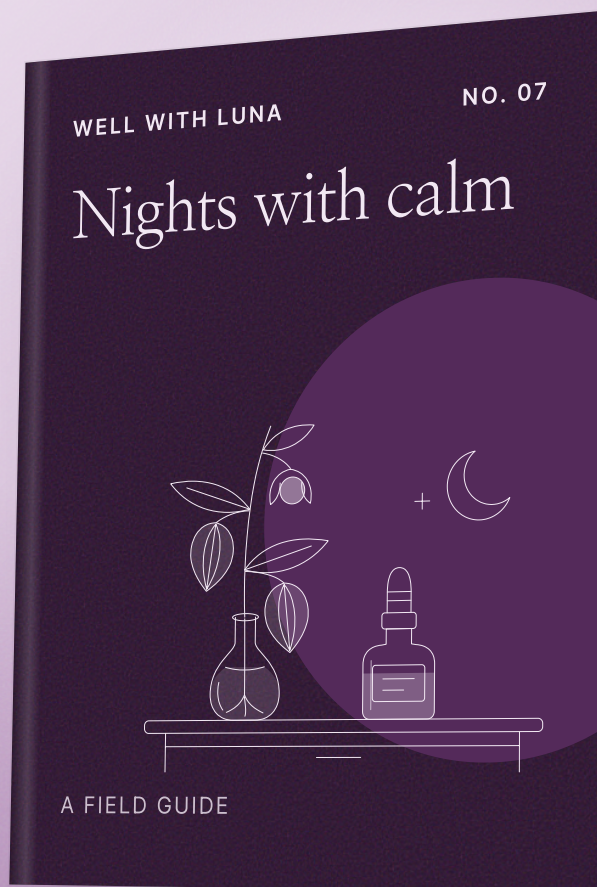




EVENING GUIDE · CALM

Compare evening adaptogens calmly before the nightstand fills up

This guide is for restless sleepers who have tried a powder or capsule and wonder what helped. After reading, you will be able to compare extracts, read labels and track four to eight weeks with care.

- **Trial doses**
Match the exact extract and dose used in trials, not milligrams alone.
- **Sleep signals**
Felt rest can improve while tracker sleep stays the same.
- **Safety stops**
Rare liver harm means clear stop signs and medication checks.

By Tara Whelan · Updated Aug 28, 2026 · 9 min read

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Evening shelves fill quickly with small brown bottles and soft promises of rest. What changes the night is not another bottle but knowing which extract was studied, at what dose, for how long, and when caution matters more than curiosity.

01

Ashwagandha extracts and what trials used

Ashwagandha carries the most consistent trial dosing among evening adaptogens, which makes comparison easier at the lamp. Anxiety and stress trials used 125 to 2000 mg per day of ashwagandha extract. Studies in high stress people showed dose dependent effects with 300 mg twice a day giving most benefits while also being safe. Most stress trials lasted 2 months, with benefits observed as early as within 2 weeks and usually increasing over 6 to 10 weeks.

The proposed stress link runs through the HPA axis, the loop between brain and adrenal glands that shapes cortisol rhythm. Clinical trials showed ashwagandha lowered cortisol levels in stressed adults by 23 to 33 percent via balancing effects on the HPA axis. A lower evening cortisol slope may help some people feel less wired before lights out, although evidence suggests support for stress rather than a promise of sleep.

Labels need the same care as doses. Standardized means the product delivers a standard amount of a biomarker such as withanolides in ashwagandha, rosavins in rhodiola and silymarins in milk thistle. Milligram weight alone does not show potency because finished extract weight includes carriers, while dry herb equivalent shows how much raw herb went into the extract. Fresh herbs contain about 95 percent water, making them less potent than dry herbs at the same weight, and mushrooms can be up to 90 percent water when fresh.

Root only versus root plus leaf matters because withanolide content and other compounds shift with plant part. Trials do not transfer directly when the plant part or standardization differs. When a label lists root extract standardized to a stated share of withanolides, it can be compared more honestly than a blend that lists only total milligrams. Where the label stays vague, treat comparison as guesswork.

02

Reishi tradition and the limits of human evidence

Reishi mushroom *Ganoderma lucidum* has been used for over 2000 years in traditional Chinese medicine as a tonic for vitality and longevity. Reishi proposed active groups are beta glucan polysaccharides, triterpenes including ganoderic acids, plus nucleosides, peptides and sterols. Those names sound technical by the nightstand, yet they explain why products differ so much in taste, color and price.

Reishi commercial products may derive from mycelium, spores or fruiting body and can vary meaningfully in chemical composition. A tea simmered from sliced fruiting body is not the same material as a mycelium powder grown on grain. Without Latin name, plant or fungal part and extraction detail, two jars called reishi may share little beyond the name.

Human evidence remains narrow. A 2016 systematic review found reishi may increase white blood cell activity and improve quality of life alongside conventional cancer treatment, not as standalone cure. Laboratory effects on immunity, tumors and metabolism have not translated into confirmed high quality human outcomes. "Reishi is not a cancer treatment." That sentence from the Top Shelf Mushrooms guide author keeps evening expectations grounded. Another mainstream view is blunter still, with the Merck Manual consumer reference stating "there appears to be no compelling reason for most people to take it".

FROM THE EDITORS

Reishi may help some people with a sense of steadiness in the hour before bed, but evidence suggests quality of life support at best, not deeper or longer sleep. Small adjunct trials on immune markers, fatigue and daily comfort are the closest human data, and they do not point to a best evening dose.

03

Holy basil doses, forms and felt sleep

Holy basil, also called tulsi, arrives with kitchen familiarity and trial data that deserve separate attention. A randomized double blind placebo controlled trial gave 100 adults 250 mg per day of standardized holy basil extract Holixer or placebo for 8 weeks. In the Holixer trial perceived stress scores dropped 37 percent in the holy basil group compared with 19 percent in placebo. Athens Insomnia Scale scores dropped 48 percent in the holy basil group compared with 27 percent in placebo.

Cortisol was measured in hair rather than saliva, which reflects longer exposure. At week 8 the holy basil group had hair cortisol of 269.68 pg per 50mg compared with 789.89 pg per 50mg in placebo. Saxena and colleagues tested holy basil extract OciBest at 1200 mg per day for 6 weeks in 150 adults and found 31.6 to 39 percent reduction in stress related symptoms. A randomized trial assessed 300 mg daily of ethanolic tulsi leaf extract for 30 days in 40 healthy adults on reaction time and attention tasks.

Felt sleep and measured sleep diverged in ways that matter for tracker owners. Holy basil improved subjective insomnia scores but Fitbit sleep efficiency and total sleep time showed no significant between group difference, so felt sleep and measured sleep diverge. A quieter mind at lights out may not move the numbers on the screen, and both can be true on the same night.

The mechanism reads as non sedating. Chester Takau, author, writes that holy basil “it is not a sedative and won’t make you drowsy the way valerian or kava can”. Tea in warm milk may soothe through ritual and warmth, while capsules match trial forms more closely. Earlier reviews rated holy basil evidence as unclear in a 2021 review of 52 trials, with a stronger 2022 holy basil trial changing the picture but needing replication.

04

Kava and reishi safety flags to respect

Some evening botanicals ask for a slower hand. FDA issued a consumer advisory that kava containing dietary supplements may be associated with severe liver injury. FDA reported kava products were associated with liver related injuries including hepatitis, cirrhosis and liver failure in over 25 adverse event reports in other countries. Tonight the record feels heavier because the FDA reported a previously healthy young female in the U.S. required liver transplantation after kava use, plus several other liver injury reports.

Kava liver injury is rare but includes severe reports, and reishi liver injury is documented in case reports, so generally tolerated in short trials does not rule out rare serious harm. Reishi is generally well tolerated at standard doses with mild effects including stomach upset, dry mouth, dizziness, itching or rash, but case reports document liver injury. Reishi interacts with anticoagulants and immunosuppressants and may raise bleeding risk with drugs such as warfarin.

Stop signs belong on the bathroom mirror rather than buried in a leaflet. Yellowing skin or eyes, dark urine, pale stool, nausea that lingers, pain in the upper right belly, unusual fatigue, itching or rash, and unusual bleeding or bruising call for stopping the product and seeking care. People who take blood thinners, immunosuppressants, diabetes drugs or sedatives, or who drink heavily or live with liver disease, should speak with a clinician or pharmacist before trying kava, reishi or holy basil. Holy basil can lower blood sugar so combining it with insulin or sulfonylurea drugs may cause hypoglycemia.

Regulation explains why label reading falls to the reader. FDA regulates herbal tinctures as dietary supplements under DSHEA, with no pre market approval required and manufacturers responsible for safety and labeling. Quality tincture labels should show Latin botanical name, plant part, extraction ratio such as 1:4 or 1:5, solvent and ethanol percentage, serving in mL and drops, volume, expiration, lot and maker address.

FROM THE EDITORS

A tincture that names *Ocimum tenuiflorum* leaf, 1:4, 30 percent ethanol, 1 mL serving and lot number can be judged. One that says only holy basil blend cannot. Keep the bottle, the box and the lot photo for eight weeks in case questions arise later.

05

Reading labels, cautions and the four week test

Pregnancy guidance is to avoid adaptogens unless a provider recommends otherwise because pregnancy specific safety trials are limited and effects on hormones, blood pressure, immunity and uterine muscle are concerns. "The conservative approach is to avoid adaptogens during pregnancy unless your healthcare provider specifically recommends otherwise." The line comes from the MindLabPro guide author, and it fits the hush of this topic. Breastfeeding, thyroid disease and polypharmacy safety also rest on limited human data.

Thyroid cautions center on ashwagandha T3 effects and Hashimoto context noted in safety reviews, where hormone shifts may alter medication needs. People with thyroid conditions, low cortisol, low blood sugar or low blood pressure should be especially careful and seek medical advice first. One product at a time keeps cause and effect legible.

How long to take or cycle evening adaptogens remains open, since most trials last four to eight weeks and longer use is untested. Whether benefits persist after stopping, and what happens with combinations of multiple adaptogens, is also unknown. What exact reishi, holy basil or ashwagandha extract and dose is best for evening use stays unclear, since preparations differ and trials do not transfer directly. Whether subjective sleep improvements with holy basil reflect objective sleep quality changes that trackers miss is another gap.

A calm home trial borrows the trial window. Choose one standardized extract with stated plant part and marker, use the studied daily amount, and hold the routine for four to eight weeks. Split morning and evening dosing for tulsi only if the label studied that pattern, such as Holixer 125 mg twice daily for 8 weeks. Track perceived stress, Athens Insomnia Scale items, sleep

efficiency, morning fatigue, side effects and interacting drugs. Note caffeine, alcohol, late screens and the long exhale before bed, since those shape nights too. When progress stalls, side effects appear or interacting drugs enter the scene, stop and ask a clinician.

06

The checklist

- ☐ Choose one adaptogen at a time for four to eight weeks
 - ☐ Match exact extract name, plant part and trial dose
 - ☐ Check withanolide or named marker standardization on label
 - ☐ Note dry herb equivalent, not milligrams alone
 - ☐ Photograph Latin name, ratio, solvent, lot and maker
 - ☐ Log stress, sleep times, night waking and morning fatigue
 - ☐ Record caffeine, alcohol, screens and late meals
 - ☐ List all drugs and supplements for interaction check
 - ☐ Avoid alcohol heavy nights with kava or reishi
 - ☐ Pause and seek care for yellow eyes, dark urine or rash
 - ☐ Avoid in pregnancy or breastfeeding without provider approval
 - ☐ Review thyroid, blood sugar and blood thinner cautions first
 - ☐ Reassess at week four, then week eight, then stop or continue with advice
-

Sources and further reading

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- Reishi Mushroom: Traditional Use vs Modern Clinical Evidence · topshelfmushrooms.com
- A Beginner's Guide To Understanding Potency Vs. Milligrams In Herbal Supplements · gaiaherbs.com
- How to Read a Herbal Tincture Label: 12 Key Fields · remedysnutrition.com

For information only, not medical advice. Ongoing trouble sleeping, loud snoring with pauses in breathing, or low mood that lingers deserves a doctor's attention, and supplements can interact with medication.



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Tara runs the night desk and the evening guides at Well with Luna. She has tested every mask, nasal strip and pillowcase we have written about, one night at a time, and keeps her notes in a paper diary by the bed.
