
Introduction
Licorice continues to be used as a pharmacological agent as well as an ingredient in tobacco and confectionery throughout countries in the East and West. Studies over the past 50 years have yielded information which has prompted new interest in the pharmacological and physiological effects of this plant. This research has revealed that the chemical structure of one of the principle agents in the root of the licorice plant is a glycoside of a triterpene called glycyrrhetinic acid. Originally its structure and activity were thought to be similar to adrenal steroid hormones such as aldosterone and cortisol, since ingestion of licorice mimicked hyperaldosteronism and was suggested as a treatment for Addison’s disease [1,2]. It is now thought that the presence of intact adrenals is required for licorice ingestion to cause sodium retention leading to subsequent hypertension [3]. This recent insight into the effects of licorice on adrenal function and steroid metabolism has led us to examine the uses of licorice historically and culturally in order to arrive at a better understanding of its many possible functions. In realizing how widely licorice has been used in many societies throughout the millennia, not only can we gain insight into its possible medicinal functions, but we can also learn to what extent licorice may pose as a potential threat to the individual. Furthermore, it is fascinating to account for some of its uses in the past in view of our present knowledge of its biochemical structure and physiological effects.