

Women's Health Care

Herbal medicine has been used throughout the centuries to ease menstrual and menopausal problems. Much of our knowledge has been passed down through midwives, and particularly through the North American native peoples who developed a deep understanding of plant remedies. This traditional use of plants, coupled with our modern understanding of active plant constituents, provides the medical herbalist with a wide range of herbs to support the female system.

Pre-Menstrual Syndrome

Pre-menstrual syndrome is a cluster of symptoms experienced by many women in the build-up to their period each month. Symptoms include breast tenderness, bloating and fluid retention, mood swings, depression, food cravings, fatigue and headaches. These symptoms can last from a couple of days to two weeks prior to menstruation, and for some women can seem to be a part of everyday life.

No two women experience the same set of symptoms each month, which is why an individual approach with herbal medicine can often bring significant benefits.

The berries of *Vitex Agnus Castus*, or Chaste Tree, are generally regarded as a supporter of the female hormonal system. Research has shown a progesterone-enhancing action by the herb. A progesteronic deficiency may manifest itself as pre-menstrual symptoms. *Agnus Castus* does not actually contain progesterone, but it supports the hormonal output of the ovaries, thus helping to balance any deficiency.

As well as helping with pre-menstrual symptoms *Agnus Castus*, or *Vitex* as it is also known, is also employed by medical herbalists to maintain a regular menstrual cycle, particularly for those who suffer painful cramps.

Mood Swings

Fluctuations in mood from feelings of depression and weepiness, to being short-fused and bad tempered, are common experiences of women during this phase of the month. This is particularly the case when women have to hold down busy demanding jobs and also look after the home and family. If you are not getting quality time for yourself then that is when emotions can snap.

Herbal support can help to balance out the emotions and bring a sense of calm and relaxation. Herbs such as *Valerian* and *Vervain* can be used to support the nervous system. It is also important to strengthen the liver when dealing with pre-menstrual symptoms; *Milk thistle* and *Dandelion root* are the herbs of choice here. These herbs help your liver to process excess hormones, reducing mood swings. Any of these can be taken on a regular basis or as required.

Painful Periods

Menstrual discomfort can be a result of hormonal imbalance or emotional tensions, and often needs to be addressed on an individual basis. Herbal and nutritional treatments can help to reduce muscular spasm and ease any associated inflammation, reducing the need for strong pain-killing medication. Herbs such as *valerian*, *cramp bark* and *ginger* may support your system at this time. These can be taken as a tea or tincture and will aid relief from muscle spasm and pain.

Massage with essential oils can also help. Essential oils of chamomile, clary sage, geranium and sweet marjoram may be particularly helpful. It is best to use a mixture of the oils blended in an oil base. Ask our dispensers for help.

Patients with specific menstrual problems such as endometriosis and polycystic ovarian syndrome should consult a qualified medical herbalist, and not try to self-treat.

Nutrition

Optimum nutrition is essential in maintaining all aspects of your health. You should aim for a rich intake of wholefoods, fresh vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds for a varied nutritional intake. Certain nutrients are particularly vital to maintaining hormonal and emotional health.

Vitamin B6 and Magnesium

Requirements are increased during the pre-menstrual phase of a woman's cycle. These essential nutrients help to maintain emotional stability as well as having a potent diuretic effect.

Evening Primrose Oil

Evening primrose oil is well researched. It is very rich in *gamma linoleic acid*, an essential fatty acid which helps to maintain hormonal health as well as promoting healthy skin, hair and nails.

The Menopause

Menopause occurs naturally in women between about 40 and 52 years of age. During the menopause the level of ovarian hormones

declines, leading to a variety of symptoms, both physical and emotional. Many women expect hot flushes to occur, but are often surprised at how they feel emotionally at this time, with symptoms such as loss of confidence, nervousness and mood swings being extremely common.

Symptoms can precede the cessation of a regular period, often presenting as a marked increase in pre-menstrual symptoms. As more is understood about H.R.T. and its potential side-effects, many women prefer to use natural therapies at this time. Herbs can provide a gentle and effective approach to the menopause, supporting the hormonal and nervous systems.

Many medicinal herbs and foods contain 'phyto-oestrogens' which can be used to enhance the body's hormonal status. These phyto-oestrogens provide the body with their starting point for manufacturing its own hormones, helping to balance fluctuating hormonal levels. The herbs employed by medical herbalists help to maintain a healthy hormonal system. By working with a medical herbalist on a one-to-one basis you can have a prescription tailored to suit your individual needs.

Some useful herbs include:

- *Sage* – is a cooling herb and helps to reduce sweats and the hot flushes associated with menopausal symptoms. It is best used in conjunction with *Agnus castus* and *Black Cohosh*.
- *Black Cohosh* – Has a powerful action on the female reproductive system as a hormonal normaliser, easing the symptoms of the menopause, such as mood swings, sweats and hot flushes. Because of its action as a relaxant it also helps with tension and irritability.
- *Agnus Castus* – has the effect of stimulating and normalising pituitary gland function responsible for the production of hormones. It is especially useful in treating menopausal symptoms and PMT. This effect takes place over 2-3 months.
- *Wild yam* - at one time was the sole source of the chemicals used to produce the contraceptive pill. Used internally, it helps maintain hormonal balance and externally, it can be used in a cream base to help with both hot flushing and vaginal dryness.

Diet and lifestyle are particularly crucial at this time. Osteoporosis prevention is one of the commonest reasons why women are prescribed H.R.T., although research is now indicating that diet, nutrition supplementation and exercise are the best preventative measures. Medical herbalists work with their patients to achieve

optimum nutrition and a treatment plan that will help to relieve symptoms and protect the body for the future.

As with all health problems, we strongly recommend that you consult a qualified medical herbalist to create a specific prescription and treatment plan to meet your individual needs.

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