

HERBAL TREATMENT OF PMS

Q.

About a week before my period I get in such a bad mood that I feel like I'm a different person and then I get backache and pain in my stomach for 2 or 3 days. I often feel like I could just stay in bed because I can hardly cope with my normal life during this time. I don't suppose any herbs could help?

A.

Some women can suffer a *mild to severe personality change* due to PMS (pre-menstrual syndrome). There have been cases of women becoming violent, shoplifting and doing things which are not their normal behaviour. PMS, also called PMT (pre-menstrual tension), is a condition affecting up to three-quarters of all women, with a variety of symptoms at some stage in their lives.

In your case, pain and feeling irritable are your main problems. Although many women expect to have unpleasant symptoms, a normal period should be trouble-free if the woman is healthy.

As a medical herbalist, I would need to ask some detailed questions to rule out other conditions, which might be causing your problems. For example, pelvic inflammatory disease, fibroids or an underactive thyroid, amongst other things, might be an underlying cause and I would then advise you to see your G.P. for further examination and tests.

Herbal treatment depends on a woman's particular symptoms. Putting it simply, there are actually four different types of PMS, called A, C, D, and H, each one presenting with different symptoms. It is thought that the wrong levels of hormones in your body are responsible for giving rise to the sort of problems you are having.

Let's take PMS type A, which is the most common type. The levels of two hormones in your body, oestrogen and progesterone, can be out of balance so that there is too much oestrogen and a lack of progesterone. If you mainly suffer from *anxiety, mood swings, nervous tension or being irritable* around period time, it is likely that is the cause.

Some plants contain phyto-oestrogens, which it is thought, can help to redress the balance of oestrogen in your body by a special mechanism.

Red clover, Fennel, Wild Yam, Sage and Liquorice are a few I might use.

The opposite, of low oestrogen and high progesterone levels, type D, can make you feel *depressed, confused, forgetful, weepy and unable to sleep*

properly. In this case I might suggest **Chasteberry** (*Vitex agnus-castus*) as part of your herbal treatment.

High levels of another hormone, aldosterone, can be responsible for *fluid retention, breast tenderness, swollen tummy, hands and feet and weight gain*. This is PMS type H (hyperhydration- when your body is holding on to too much water). Several herbs, including **Burdock and Nettle** (which I mentioned in last month's article on allergies), can help reduce water-retention.

Finally, type C, where there are low levels of prostaglandins, can result in *food cravings and increased appetite, headaches, tiredness, dizziness, and palpitations (being aware of your heartbeat)*.

Other signs and symptoms, which can be attributed to PMS, include *blotchy skin, lank hair, diarrhoea and constipation, lack of interest in sex, asthma and hayfever*.

Proper liver function is essential to maintain normal hormone balance. There are many very useful herbs, which I use to help balance hormone levels and assist that hard-working organ, the liver, to process the hormones.

Everyone at some time or other finds it difficult to give up the things we know are bad for us and to over-indulge in alcohol, smoking and the wrong type of diet puts heavy demands on the liver. At these times, herbs such as **Artichoke** or the common **Dandelion** and especially **Milk Thistle** can protect the liver from damage.

Another herb I often use in my prescriptions for patients, is **Cramp Bark** (*Viburnum opulus*) to help relieve period pain.

If bleeding is heavy, **Ladies'Mantle, Shepherd's Purse, Yarrow and Raspberry leaf** are some of my herbs of choice.

I must stress that it is advisable to consult a medical herbalist before taking herbs to make sure they are the right ones for you, particularly if there is any chance of you being pregnant, if you have high blood pressure or certain medical conditions. Any herbal treatment I give is holistic, it depends on the individual patient and each prescription may be different.

Other things you can do which are helpful:-

- If you can talk about your feelings, try to explain beforehand to your family, friends and work colleagues that you get weepy or irritable so they understand that you can't help it. You could also try getting them to read this article!
- Think of having periods as a positive thing, rather than a 'curse'. It's a natural cycle in a woman's body, just as the seasons change from spring through to winter.
- Try to get some gentle exercise like a brisk walk, yoga or dancing to improve your mood and the blood circulation to the pelvic area.

- The food you eat can have an important part to play as it affects your hormone levels. A diet which can help reduce pain should have less fat and more fibre from wholegrains, vegetables, beans, peas and lentils and fruit. Vitamin B6 found in bananas, nuts and wholegrains has been shown to reduce pain. If you take a B6 supplement don't take too much – no more than 150mg a day to avoid possible nerve damage. I would also advise reducing your calcium loss by cutting down on salt, sugar, coffee and tobacco and increasing exercise and vitamin D. This should in turn help with painful cramps.
- Warm baths with herbs and/or essential oils can help relieve pain and improve mood. You can buy dried herbs from a health food shop or herbalist (if you have difficulty finding the herbs you need, send an email to info@moiraross.co.uk). A blend I like for a nice relaxing bath is **Chamomile, Lavender, Marigold, Ginger**. Make an infusion (the same as if you were making a pot of tea) of 30 grams of herb blend to 1 litre of boiling water, cover, and leave to brew for 15 minutes, then strain. Add the infusion to a warm bath.

Moira Ross
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