

The Role of Herbal Medicine in Women's Health

"Just trust yourself, then you will know how to live."

– Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

"We are not human beings trying to be spiritual. We are spiritual beings trying to be human."

– Jacquelyn Small

Conception

Infertility is a more commonly occurring condition affecting many women. There are numerous factors that may contribute to problems achieving conception including but not limited:

- Hormone imbalances: fibroids, cysts, endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, previous infection or scar tissue
- Structural changes: pelvic injuries can lead blocked nerve impulses and interrupt blood flow to the pelvic region;
- Low sperm count due to environmental pollution, radiation and other endocrine disruptors
- Extended use of the birth control pill
- Thyroid imbalances
- Allergies that create an immune response to foreign proteins, such as sperm
- Nutritional deficiencies
- A tough coating on the eggs can make the egg impenetrable to sperm.
- Changes to cervical mucous. The vaginal mucous pH is generally acidic; a diet high in sugar, white flour products and starch can create alkaline mucous that is hostile to sperm.
- Contact and exposure to xenoestrogens in your environment: These chemicals dramatically affect the endocrine systems and hormones of both our animals in our food chain and our own health by contributing to problems with fibroids, endometriosis, uterine cysts, polycystic ovarian syndrome and problems with fertility, even impacting how women experience the transition through menopause.
- Stress: Infertility can lead to stress and similarly stress can lead to infertility. Stress may affect our bodies' production of LH, interfering with ovulation; the stress response can tell our body that it is not a favorable time for conception to occur.

Be well first. Infertility is nature's way of ensuring survival of the fittest. Through focusing on cleansing and detoxification, uterine tonics used to balance hormone levels and regulate the menstrual cycle, addressing other possible blocks to reproduction and improving overall health we can increase the likelihood of successful conception and a healthy pregnancy.

Hormonal Imbalances

"Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change."

– Katherine Mansfield

During our teenage years and other times throughout our life, a woman may periodically experience changes with menstrual regularity, an absence of a menstrual cycle (amenorrhea), premenstrual tension, bloating, cramping and mood fluctuations (dysmenorrhea), flooding and heavy cycles (menorrhagia); all signs that the reproductive system requires extra attention. Herbal medicine provides gentle support by nourishing reproductive tissues and impact hormones by acting directly on the pituitary (master gland) governing the release of the follicle

stimulating hormone (FSH) and Lutenising hormone (LH), which influence ovarian function and the adrenal glands, to help regulate menstrual flow, minimize cramping and stabilize mood changes during the month.

Herbs can also support liver function; the liver is involved in reproductive health by functioning to break down excess circulating hormones to speed their removal from the body, for minimizing fluid retention and provides direct antispasmodic action for pain management and cramping.

Herbal Medicine can be used for hormone imbalances as pre menstrual tension, cramping, fluid retention, irritability, migraines, skin problems, irregular or heavy menses, pelvic congestion, fibroids, endometriosis and cysts. These conditions are best addressed through a consultation.

Reproductive Tonics: Herbs, which tone and strengthen the reproductive system that can be, used in conjunction with other herbs for supporting whole body health and specific health issues. Tonics improve the function of a particular system, provide nourishment. False Unicorn (*Chamaelirium luteum*), Partridge Berry (*Mitchella repens*), Chaste berry (*Vitex agnus castus*), Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*), Red Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*).

Emmenagogues: herbs, which stimulate, regulate and promote a normal menstrual flow. They should never be used in pregnancy and are best used with the care and guidance of a trained herbal practitioner. Many emmenagogues can be used as tonics to the hormonal system. Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*), Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), Rue (*Ruta graveolens*),

Astringents: herbs used to reduce the menstrual flow and excessive bleeding by contracting blood vessels and tighten mucous membranes. Shepherds Purse (*Capsella bursa pastoris*), Cayenne (*Capsicum minimum*), Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vulgaris*), Beth Root (*Trillium erectum*)

Diuretics: herbs that can reduce or eliminate fluid retention associated with premenstrual tension by increasing the flow of urine from the kidneys. Dandelion Leaf (*Taraxacum officinalis folia*), Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Cleavers (*Galium aperine*)

Antispasmodics and Nervines: herbs used to reduce muscular cramping, pain and spasms and reduce stress and tension and are best taken beginning a few days prior to the expected cramping. Crampbark (*Viburnum opulus*), Black Haw (*Viburnum prunifolium*), Wild Yam (*Dioscorea villosa*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*)

Herbs are often used in combination for addressing the broader picture of a health issue. Which herb is most appropriate for use depends upon the larger picture and is best assessed through a consultation to ensure that any possible underlying health concerns are being addressed and the most appropriate herbs are being blended together for your program.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

“The world is round and the place which may seem like the end
may also be only the beginning.”

— Ivy Baker Priest

Pregnancy can be the most magical and exciting time for an expectant mother and her partner.

Nature provides us with many tools for supporting both the mother and baby through this time of growth and renewal, to strengthen the spirits and body, to promote a healthy pregnancy and support the birthing process. For each trimester of pregnancy, a program incorporating nutrition and herbal medicine can be safely used to address issues such as:

- ❖ indigestion and heartburn, minimize nausea and vomiting
- ❖ help reduce high blood pressure
- ❖ temporary insomnia
- ❖ reducing stretch marks
- ❖ address hemorrhoids and varicose veins
- ❖ preparation for labor
- ❖ stimulation of lactation
- ❖ help prevent post natal depression
- ❖ speed up healing from tearing or after an episiotomy
- ❖ help tone the uterine muscles and balance hormones after pregnancy
- ❖ constipation
- ❖ cracked nipples and engorged breasts
- ❖ emotional stress and restlessness
- ❖ fluid retention

Resources for a Healthy Pregnancy and Childbirth

Galactagogues: herbs known to increase the supply and flow of breast milk. Fennel Seeds (*Foeniculum vulgare*), Blessed Thistle (*Carbenia benedicta*), Milk Thistle (*Carduus marianus*), Red Raspberry leaves (*Rubus idaeus*), Nettle leaves (*Urtica dioica*), Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum graecum*), Goat's Rue (*Galega officinalis*), Caraway (*Carum carvi*), Aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) and Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*).

Morning Sickness: anti nausea herbs can assist to settle the stomach. Ginger (*Zingiber officinalis*), Black Horehound (*Ballota nigra*), Red Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), Chamomile (*Chamomilla recutita*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*).

Heartburn and indigestion: Ginger (*Zingiber officinalis*), Chamomile (*Chamomilla recutita*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*), Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Marshmallow (*Althea officinalis*), Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*).

Perineal Healing: Herbal sitz baths are one of the most useful secrets to speed up the healing of perineal tearing and/or stitches. Herbs can assist in cooling the inflamed tissues, relieve itching, and help to prevent infection and speed up healing. A poultice of herbs can be applied directly to the perineal tissues or alternatively an herbal tea can be brewed (in the bathtub) and used to soak and soothe the healing tissues. Herbs for the sitz bath include Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), Lavender (*Lavendula officinalis*), Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*), Comfrey leaves (*Symphytum officinalis*), Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), Goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*).

Fluid Retention: Increasing your water intake, surprisingly, will help relieve fluid buildup in the body. Some gentle diuretic herbs include: Dandelion leaf (*Taraxacum officinalis folia*), Corn silk (*Zea mays*), Couch grass (*Agropyron repens*)

Anemia: mineral rich herbs include but are not limited to: Nettle leaves (*Urtica dioica folia*), Dandelion leaf (*Taraxacum officinalis folia*), Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*), Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*) -use yellow dock in moderation only.

Post natal depression: The sudden change in hormone levels, coupled with the new responsibilities of motherhood can be an overwhelming time for many. It is important to ensure adequate nutrition, possible nutritional deficiencies and stress management. In a clinic environment some herbs of benefit include: Red Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), Motherwort (*Leonurus*), Nettles (*Urtica dioica folia*), Borage (*Borago officinalis*), Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*), and Oatstraw (*Avena sativa*).

Herbs to avoid during the first and second trimesters of pregnancy

Aconite (*Aconitum napellis*), Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*), Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*), Black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), Bryony (*Bryonia dioica*), Chapparral (*Larrea* spp.), Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), Comfrey (*Symphytum officinalis*), Cotton Root bark (*Gossypium* spp.), Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*), Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*), Goldenseal (*Hydrastis Canadensis*), Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*), Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), Male fern (*Dryopteris felix-mas*), Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgare*), Ma Haung (*Ephedra sinensis*), Mistletoe (*Viscum album*), Myrrh (*Commiphora mol mol*), Oregon Grape Root (*Berberis aquifolium*) Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), Pokeroot (*Phytolacca decandra*), Senna (*Cassia senna*), Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*), Rue (*Ruta graveolens*), Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), Sage (*Salvia officinalis*), Thuja/Tree of Life (*Thuja occidentalis*), Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*), Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*),

Essential Oils to Avoid During Pregnancy

Cinnamon, Basil, Hyssop, Nutmeg, Clary Sage, Myrrh, Thyme, Oregano, Cypress, Marjoram, Juniper, Pennyroyal, Anise and Fennel.

Menopause

“Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself and know that everything in this life has a purpose.”

– Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

What has unfolded in our society such that even our natural life cycles are now viewed as needing medicating?

Transitions of Menopause

Peri Menopause: the process of the gradual cessation of menstruation, which may last 6-10 years, during which the menstrual cycle changes in character and over time menstruation will cease. During perimenopause, the time prior to menopause, many women ovulate irregularly, and although hormone levels eventually decrease, estrogen levels generally do not lower until the last year of perimenopause, as menopause nears the estrogen levels rise very high and then decline rapidly.

Post menopause: The time after cessation of menstruation, marking the beginning of the second half of a women's life, there is no other stage in the life of a women that has as much potential for empowerment, understanding and moving into 'ones power' than this time.

Menopause: known as the change of life, which generally occurs in women ages 47 to 50 (with

a range between ages 40-55). A woman is said to be menopausal when 6-12 months pass without a period. Blood tests can be done to measure levels of Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH) and Luteinizing Hormone (LH) and used as a tool to confirm if a woman is within menopausal range, although elevated FSH and LH on blood test results do not 100% guarantee that a woman is menopausal. Theoretically a woman can become pregnant up to one year after her last menstrual cycle.

Herbal Medicine for Menopausal Symptoms:

Optimal nutrition and herbal medicine can play a role in minimizing adverse menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats, play a role in prevention of heart disease and osteoporosis, lessen vaginal dryness and support the nervous system for insomnia, headaches and depression. In particular, a group of foods known as phytoestrogens can assist to balance hormones and lessen menopausal symptoms.

Phytoestrogens are plant molecules that have a structurally similar character to human estrogens, but are not hormones; phytoestrogens bind with our bodies' estrogen receptors, creating a balancing effect on hormone levels.

Though plant phytoestrogens are not identical to human hormones, they can work by activating our bodies own estrogen receptors and have the ability to act both as estrogen agonists (proestrogen) and estrogen antagonists (anti estrogen). Phyto estrogens are capable of exerting a weak estrogen like effect; thus if the bodies total estrogen is low, as commonly found in menopause, the phyto estrogens will provide a net increase in estrogen in the body. Plant phytoestrogens are also referred to as anti estrogenic, due to their ability to occupy estrogen receptor sites, they lower an excess net effect of circulating estrogen and can compete for binding in our bodies estrogen receptor sites against the more potent synthetic xeno estrogens (toxic estrogens found in our environment).

Herbal Medicine for Menopausal Symptoms can assist with:

- ❖ hot flushes and night sweats
- ❖ flooding
- ❖ depression and fatigue
- ❖ headaches
- ❖ insomnia, anxiety and stress related conditions
- ❖ memory and concentration enhancement
- ❖ heart palpitations and elevated blood pressure
- ❖ urinary frequency
- ❖ peace of mind and improved quality of life

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Hepatics: herbs which support the function of the liver to detoxify, break down excess circulating hormones, minimize pelvic congestion, assist premenstrual depression and help to eliminate toxic chemicals from the body. Dandelion Root (*Taraxacum officinalis radix*), Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*), Milk Thistle (*Carduus marianus*), Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*), Yellow Dock Root (*Rumex crispus*)

Adaptogens: Herbs that contain balancing, regulative and tonic properties are known as adaptogens. Adaptogen herbs are used to increase physical and mental endurance, boost vitality and help the body cope with stress, improve resistance to infection and enhance immune system function, their balancing actions help maintain optimal organ function within the body and can be used in conjunction with allopathic medicine (prescription medicine), often minimizing side effects caused by many drugs. Some adaptogens, or 'harmony-restoring agents include, but are not limited to: Siberian Ginseng -the Latin name in parenthesis (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*), Ashwaganda (*Withonia somnifera*), Damiana (*Turnera diffusa*), and the ancient Chinese herb, Huang Qi (*Astragalus membranaceus*) and Medicinal Mushrooms such as Reishi (*Ganoderma lucidum*) and Maitake (*Grifola frondosa*).

Pelvic Decongestants: help relieve pelvic congestion, abdominal heaviness and pain, they are thought to work by eliminating excess circulating estrogens, improve the metabolism and relieve portal congestion. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), White Dead Nettle (*Lamium album*)

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How Xenoestrogens Can Aggravate Hormonal Imbalance in Menopause

Avoid environmental xenoestrogens (generally made from petrochemical byproducts), which are stronger than our body's own hormones and very toxic estrogen mimickers. Some xenoestrogens activate hormone receptors, stimulating hormone levels; others block receptors preventing our bodies' hormones from carrying out their tasks. Our exposure to estrogens is skyrocketing through the inundation of environmental xenoestrogens; in fact the estrogen levels of perimenopausal women in North America are considered on the high end of the spectrum when compared to worldwide trends. Women may become estrogen dominant due to an earlier onset of menstruation, the use of synthetic hormones and a lifetime exposure to environmental estrogens, this estrogen dominance may lead to a proportionately greater decline in estrogen levels as we enter menopause, further aggravating symptoms. Estrogen stimulates cell proliferation (cell growth) as well as an increase in estrogen receptors. A long term over exposure to environmental estrogens may predispose to cancerous changes in susceptible tissues.

Recommended Reading

The Menopause Industry: How the Medical Establishment Exploits Women by Sandra Coney
What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Menopause by John Lee and Virginia Hopkins

Women's Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine by Tori Hudson

The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women: Exploding the Estrogen Myth by Barbara Seaman

Information given here is for consumer education only.
It is not meant to replace the advice of a qualified health care professional in a
clinic environment.