

SOS for PMS

Herbalist Toni Green looks at how these precious green medicines can tame the monthly terror of premenstrual syndrome.



* D-I-Y with Toni: PMS tea

Combine 1 teaspoon each of finely chopped raspberry leaf and dandelion leaf with a thinly sliced 1-inch piece of ginger root. Pour over 1 cup of boiling water, and steep for 10 minutes. Strain, add a dash of honey, and drink 2-3 cups daily.

Vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*)

Also known as chasteberry, this nourishes the pituitary gland and lengthens the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle, which boosts levels of luteinising hormone and blocks the release of follicle-stimulating hormone: this effectively balances a woman's oestrogen:progesterone ratio by lowering oestrogen levels, and it is elevated oestrogen that worsens PMS symptoms. Vitex eases PMS symptoms of breast tenderness, constipation, irritability, depression, and mood changes. It is also effective in slowing excessive bleeding caused by uterine fibroids, and symptoms associated with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). One study, published in the *Journal of Alternative & Complementary Medicine*, showed that a combination of vitex and St John's wort eased PMS-related anxiety, bloating, and cravings.

Dandelion leaf (*Taraxacum officinale*)

A potent diuretic, this eliminates excess fluid, and so reduces the bloating and water weight gain so common in PMS. Bonus: Dandelion leaf is rich in natural potassium, so it doesn't strip the body's stores of potassium like synthetic diuretics do. Dandelion greens can be easily added to soups and salad. Caution: Do not use dandelion in conjunction with lithium.

Evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*)

This is rich in omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids and gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), which inhibits the body's production of prostaglandins. Elevated prostaglandin levels are linked to mastitis, breast cysts, and pre-eclampsia. Evening primrose oil (EPO) is particularly helpful for the cyclic breast pain, fluid retention, and mood swings associated with PMS, as well as for other hormone-driven symptoms, such as menopausal hot flushes and period pain. Studies also show EPO has positive effects on depression, PCOS, and PMS-related anxiety. Caution: EPO is contraindicated in cases where drugs used to treat schizophrenia are taken.

St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)

Widely used to treat mild to moderate depression, insomnia, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), and mood swings associated with both PMS and menopause, a study published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychopharmacology* reveals St John's wort is not only significantly more effective than the drug Prozac, but safe and well-tolerated, too. This herb works in three ways: one, it blocks reuptake of serotonin (a major neurotransmitter involved in mood regulation); two, it slows clearance of dopamine and noradrenaline, which are needed for cognitive function; and three, it increases the activity of liver enzymes, speeding the breakdown of oestrogen and oestradiol. This is particularly significant in treating PMS, as elevated oestrogen worsens symptoms by interacting with brain transmitters that trigger mood swings. Caution: St John's wort can interfere with the Pill, making it less effective; it is also contraindicated with pharmaceutical antidepressants, lithium, and 5-HTP.

Cramp bark (*Viburnum opulus*)

This antispasmodic and relaxant herb is helpful for all muscle cramps and tension, but especially for the smooth muscle found in the uterus. It also provides an astringent effect, which helps to control heavy menstrual bleeding. *

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