

Hormone helpers

Painful breasts, period cramps, mood swings? There's a herb (or three) for that, says naturopath Toni Green.

Vitex (*Vitex agnus-castus*)

Probably the best herb for balancing female hormones, this normalises the menstrual cycle and reduces premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms, like sore breasts, irritability, and bloating, as well as treating spotting and painful or missed periods. Studies show vitex mimics dopamine, a neurotransmitter involved in mood and libido which lowers prolactin levels. With continued use (more than three months), vitex boosts progesterone production, and regulates and promotes ovulation, which in turn lowers follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH); it can therefore enhance fertility if elevated FSH is a factor, and treat oestrogen-excess states like endometriosis and fibroids. Vitex also combats hormonally-driven acne, and increases melatonin secretion, relieving insomnia. Caution: Do not use during pregnancy, lactation, or if on the Pill.

Dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*)

Long used in traditional Chinese medicine, this warming tonic herb increases circulation and production of healthy red blood cells, and boosts blood flow to the uterus, thus decreasing painful menstrual spasms. Dong quai regulates prostaglandins, inflammatory compounds that cause period pain, but without the side effects of anti-inflammatory drugs. It is also effective in treating endometriosis, another inflammatory condition. Caution: Avoid during pregnancy or if taking blood thinners.

Coleus (*Coleus forskohlii*)

This supports thyroid function by stimulating production of thyroid hormones and also levels of cyclic AMP (cAMP), a signal carrier between cells and hormones that is especially active in the hypothalamus-pituitary axis which controls the thyroid's production of T3 and T4, making it an effective treatment for hypothyroidism not caused

by iodine deficiency. This ability to increase cAMP also makes coleus a useful weight-loss herb, because cAMP activates hormone-sensitive lipase, a fat-burning enzyme that improves insulin sensitivity and releases stored fatty acids.

Peony is an effective treatment for PCOS, fibroids, and painful or irregular periods, especially when combined with licorice.

Peony (*Paeonia lactiflora*)

This herb is widely used in Eastern and Western herbal medicine to treat polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, ovarian failure, elevated prolactin levels, and androgen excess (a cause of excess facial hair in women). Peony's active ingredient, paeoniflorin, benefits ovarian function via its effect on aromatase, an enzyme involved in follicle maturation and ovulation.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)

This is an adaptogenic herb that improves insulin sensitivity and supports the adrenal glands, therefore helping us to handle stress better. It can help both hyper- and hypothyroid issues, supporting a sluggish thyroid in people with Hashimoto's while also improving health for those with an overactive thyroid, as in Graves' disease. Ashwagandha stimulates blood flow to female reproductive organs, while a study published in *Ayu* has shown it reduces hot flushes, anxiety, and depression in menopausal women. ✨



D-I-Y: Hormone tonic

Take 75g each of dried vitex, dong quai and ashwagandha, chop finely, and place in a 1.5 litre glass jar. Pour over 1 litre of vodka or brandy, seal, and store in a warm dark place for six weeks, shaking bottle every couple of days. Strain, rebottle, and label. **Dosage:** One teaspoon twice daily, diluted in a little water.

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