

Best herbs for women

Felled by fatigue? Clobbered by cramps? Instead of popping a painkiller, try a herb.

Vitex agnus-castus

Aptly known as “cramp bark”, this normalises the menstrual cycle by enhancing the luteal phase. A British Medical Journal study showed that 52 percent of women reported relief from PMS-related irritability and headaches when taking vitex. It decreases mastalgia (breast pain or tenderness), cramps, cravings, and can be used to treat fibrocystic breast disease, infertility, amenorrhoea (absent periods), too-frequent periods, perimenopausal symptoms, and to prevent miscarriage in women with low progesterone levels. Caution: Contraindicated during pregnancy and lactation; note that vitex also interacts with the Pill.

Shatavari

This herb’s Sanskrit name means “she who has one hundred husbands”, a nod to its use as a sexual tonic. It is considered in Ayurvedic medicine to be nourishing, soothing, cooling, and lubricating, and is used to increase lactation, soothe damaged vaginal tissue post-birth, stop uterine bleeding, and boost fertility. Modern science shows that shatavari contains shatavarin-I and protodioscin, saponins which increase follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), which in turn increases oestrogen production, enhances testosterone, and lubricates sex organs, which all stimulate the libido. Caution is advised with use during pregnancy.

Sage

Traditionally used for digestive problems and overproduction of perspiration, sage also has female-friendly benefits, including relieving period pain, correcting excessive milk flow during breast-feeding, and reducing hot flushes – one study showed that sage was 46 to 100 percent effective in alleviating a slew of menopausal problems, including night sweat sweats, mood swings, insomnia, fatigue, irregular heartbeat, sore muscles, and poor memory. Caution: It is contraindicated during pregnancy.

Raspberry leaf

Used as a pregnancy and childbirth tonic since the 11th century, this eases morning sickness, strengthens uterine muscles, and tones the

pelvic floor; during childbirth, it makes contractions more efficient, thus shortening labour and making birth less painful; and post-birth, it boosts breast milk supply.

Peony

This stimulates circulation to the reproductive organs, reducing uterine stagnation, painful periods, and ovarian cysts. Studies show peony performs better with licorice, especially for improving ovarian function, providing optimum conditions for ovulation and fertility; lowering testosterone in women with PCOS; and alleviating acne and facial hair. Caution: Contraindicated in pregnancy, lactation, hypertension, oedema, pre- and post-surgery.

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D-I-Y with Toni:

Ladies' choice

To control hot

flushes, chop a handful of fresh sage and soak overnight in lemon or lime juice. In the morning, strain and drink the juice, diluting with water to taste.

