

Women's health - choices

Whether it's hormones causing chaos or the need for a simple pick-me-up, there are alternative remedies available for women

Emma Wilkinson

There is a wide range of alternative medicines, be they herbal preparations or other supplements, that women may find useful in alleviating the symptoms of several common conditions.

Of course, anyone concerned about a health problem should seek the advice of a doctor. And patients should always tell their doctor or pharmacist if they are taking anything, however safe they may think it is, in case it interferes with any prescribed medicines.

PMT

About one in 20 women suffers from premenstrual tension (PMT) in the run up to their period, which alongside the physical symptoms of bloating and stomach pain can also come with mood swings, tension and generally feeling emotional.

In addition to reducing alcohol and caffeine intake and taking some exercise there are also alternative remedies that may help.

These include a daily calcium supplement

or taking 200 to 400mg magnesium a day during the two weeks before a period. Vitamin B6 may also be useful, but it is advisable for customers to consult a doctor about how much to take.

One interesting supplement, which has been shown in clinical trials to be effective for reducing the symptoms of PMT, is exotic plant extract agnus castus. It is not clear exactly how it works, but it is thought to have an effect on balancing hormone production.

Some women also find evening primrose oil useful for reducing breast pain.

Menopause

It used to be that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was an almost automatic treatment for women going through the menopause.

But in recent years reports of increased risk of breast cancer and heart disease has resulted in a dramatic drop in prescriptions and has prompted women to seek alternative therapies to alleviate their symptoms.

There are a handful of supplements that may be useful during the menopause but it is important to point out that evidence for their effectiveness is mixed.

Agnus castus again may be useful although, unlike in use for PMT, its effects on menopausal symptoms have not been well studied.

Black Cohosh has long been used to help with emotional menopausal symptoms, such as mood swings, depression and weepiness, although a couple of recent studies have found it does not seem to reduce hot flushes.

As with PMT, evening primrose oil may help with any breast pain and both dong quai and ginkgo biloba have also been used for menopause symptoms.

Although generally well tolerated, there have been concerns about menopausal women opting for complementary medicines in the belief they are 'safer' than conventional treatments. It is important for women wanting to try any of these remedies to check there are no contraindications to their taking them.

COUNTERPART PLUS

supported by



Download all the Counterpart Plus articles at www.chemistanddruggist.co.uk/stafftraining

Pharmacy staff training

Module 0112 – Alternative medicine

In this article you will learn:

- Common conditions that may affect women
- What alternative remedies are available and who they might be suitable for
- When customers should be advised to consult a doctor.

Nutrition

In an ideal world we would all get the right nutrients we need from our diet. But realistically that does not always happen and women may feel they need a bit of a boost. There are supplements for certain periods of life, such as pregnancy, where folic acid is key and vitamin A can be dangerous, or post-menopause where keeping bones healthy is an important factor.

For anyone who has had a spate of colds or who just feels a bit run down, a multivitamin or even just a vitamin C tablet may help boost the immune system. But for warding off those nasty bugs, echinacea may be the key. A study in 2007 found it could halve the chance of catching a cold.

Sleep

Around 15 per cent of adults report consistent problems with sleeping and that figure is even higher among women. It is worth getting a doctor's advice as sleeplessness can be a sign of physical illness, such as respiratory problems or heart disease, or a symptom of depression. There are, however, a host of remedies and techniques that may alleviate insomnia and could be safer in the long term than some drug treatments, which can become addictive.

The antihistamines promethazine and diphenhydramine, marketed under trade names such as Nytol, can be purchased

over the counter but should only be used as a short-term solution as they may lead to rebound insomnia.

Valerian, a herbal remedy that has long been used for its sedative properties, comes in capsule, tea, tablet or liquid extract form, and has been shown to be effective in some limited small studies. It also is associated with less of a 'hangover' effect than some other sleep treatments.

But in reality, the best therapy may be to try some relaxation techniques, including visualising a relaxing scene, meditation, yoga and progressive muscle relaxation, which seems to be the option that offers the most promise. Good sleep hygiene, cutting down on tea, coffee and alcohol and eating magnesium-rich foods may also help.

Aromatherapy might be worth a try, in particular using lavender, which is thought to have sedative properties and is available as an essential oil to put on a pillow or in a warm bath. Some women find chamomile tea in the evening helps them relax.

Heart health

The best way to protect your heart is to eat a balanced diet, with plenty of fruit and



vegetables, maintain a healthy weight and take regular exercise. But for women looking for additional ways to boost their heart health, there are supplements available. Most notable among these is garlic. For anyone who is worried about garlic breath, garlic capsules may be a good alternative.

Studies have shown that in healthy people garlic can help to maintain the elastic properties of the main artery feeding the heart and prevent blood clots.

Essential fatty acids are vital in the diet and among other functions help to reduce blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and reduce the risk of blood clot. For anyone worried they are not getting enough from their diet, these can be found in fish oil, flaxseed, grapeseed and evening primrose oil supplements.

Mental health

If you are having full-blown panic attacks then herbal remedies are unlikely to help, but there are alternative medicines that may alleviate some of the symptoms of anxiety and generalised depression.

Most well known of these is St John’s wort, which increases levels of natural dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine to help with feelings of depression. However, a note of caution always needs to accompany

use of St John’s wort as it can interfere with prescribed medications, including antidepressants.

Tea made from catnip is also reported to help reduce anxiety, and may help with tension headaches. Likewise fennel is thought to have calming properties and may relieve stomach upset caused by anxiety.

It is also worth mentioning Bach Flower Remedies, which include ingredients such as white chestnut, larch and agrimony to reduce fear, anxiety and worry.

Joints

As we get older, we all suffer from increasingly creaky joints yet long-term painkiller use should be avoided if possible. But can those aches and pains be alleviated by supplements?

Glucosamine is a compound found naturally in the body and is needed to build and repair cartilage. In supplements it is often combined with chondroitin sulfate, another molecule found in cartilage. It can be really useful in osteoarthritis, particularly in the knee.

The other main supplement that has long been used to help with joint pain and stiffness in arthritis is cod liver oil, which is high in omega 3 fatty acids and vitamin A and vitamin D.



Evaluation

- Why are fewer women using HRT than in previous years?
- Why should you advise customers to visit a doctor if they are having continued sleep problems?
- Why should customers exercise caution when using St John’s wort?



Information

Guidance on everything from herbs to acupuncture. www.safealternativemedicine.co.uk

The NHS Directory of Complementary and Alternative Practitioners

Compiled and managed for use by NHS healthcare professionals. www.nhsdirectory.org

Related products



Essential Oils selection by Care

Aromatherapy massage has long been used to promote relaxation and reduce stress. Massaging with essential oils enables relaxation and a feeling of wellbeing, leading to reduced stress and anxiety.

Essential Oils can also be used in the bath, for inhalation and for vaporisation in burners or diffusers. Care offers a selection of oils.

Citronella Oil is a refreshing oil that can be gently clarifying and uplifting, while Spike Lavender Oil is warm and invigorating.

Lavender Oil is one of the most widely used essential oils due to its calming and soothing properties, which help promote rest and relaxations.

Tea Tree Oil has become renowned for its traditional roles as a herbal antiseptic.

Thornton & Ross 01484 842217
www.care-medicines.co.uk