

Women's health

To help you stay in the best possible shape during the different stages of your life, naturopath Tania Flack shares her expert advice on everything from period pain to hot flashes.



ILLUSTRATION BY FRISCOLLA NIELSEN

WOMEN have very specific health concerns; unlike men, we are hormonally more complex. We have to learn how to maintain health while under the influence of the (not always) gently shifting sands of fluctuating hormones. This delicate balancing act occurs every single day of our reproductive lives, and continues into menopause. In some respects, hormones are our best friends: they keep us informed of how our body is coping with our diet, lifestyle and environment, by acting as an early warning system when things aren't going well. And of course there's our unique plumbing, which can cause a whole different set of issues. Let's look at the most common health concerns women face, why they occur, and how nutrition and natural medicines can support, rebalance, and restore health.

Period pain

Why it occurs: Despite what we may believe, period pain is not part of a healthy menstrual cycle; mild discomfort is the most we should experience. Women who experience regular period pain have a more pro-inflammatory response to the hormonal changes required to help themselves shed the lining of the uterus each month. The good news is that period pain can be successfully treated with natural medicines.

What you can do: Warm ginger tea works wonders due to its powerful anti-inflammatory action. The tea should be made with freshly grated ginger and left to steep for 10 minutes before drinking. Sipping this for the first couple of days of your period can really help to relieve pain. Consuming oily fish - mackerel, salmon,

tuna, sardines - or supplementing with good quality fish oil will reduce inflammation and period pain. If you get cramps, magnesium will help this - take it a couple of days before your period for best effect. One caveat: if your period pain is due to endometriosis, you need specialised treatment to support your hormone metabolism. This may include broccoli sprout extract, turmeric, rosemary, St Mary's thistle, B group vitamins, and phytoestrogens, such as flax seed lignans and soy isoflavones. See your naturopath.

Low energy

Why it occurs: Feeling tired all the time is a modern epidemic and many women accept that it is normal. Nothing could be further from the truth: like most common ailments, fatigue is the body's way of telling us that something is not right. Tiredness can be due to many causes:

poor nutrition, poor nutrient absorption, lack of sleep, adrenal fatigue, thyroid problems, or low-grade chronic infections.

What you can do: Due to fatigue's multi-factorial nature, the best place to start is with a check-up by your health practitioner, who can run a range of tests to assess the cause. Once the cause is identified you can use natural medicines to restore energy levels. For example, if your adrenal hormones are affected, the herbs withania, rehmannia, licorice and Siberian ginseng help

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restore adrenal function. Low iron and B12 is another common cause of fatigue and can easily be rectified with supplementation and dietary changes. Professional assessment of your diet is very important as our requirements change according to the level of stress we are under, our physical activity, workload and social activities; so it's easy to become deficient if your life has changed but your diet hasn't. Remember, feeling tired for more than a two-week period, even after you have had adequate rest, is a sign that something's not right. Don't accept it, seek professional advice.

PMS (Premenstrual syndrome)

Why it occurs: We may joke about it, but being irritable, bursting into tears at the drop of a hat, and craving chocolate every month is not fun or normal, and in extreme cases it can really affect relationships at home and at work. Turning into a PMS monster is generally related to the way hormones are metabolised by the liver and gut. When these organs aren't working optimally we experience a temporary excess of hormones circulating in our system, usually the week prior to our period, which causes changes in mood and behaviour.

What you can do: To correct the cause of PMS we need to address liver and bowel health and the best long-term results are achieved by supporting detoxification. This may include cutting out alcohol, processed foods and sugar for a time while increasing your intake of fresh vegetables, fruits, fish, nuts and seeds. Herbs to support liver and bowel health include St Mary's thistle, globe artichoke, dandelion, schisandra, and licorice. Nutrients that specifically support detoxification

include n-acetyl cysteine, glutamine, taurine, B group vitamins, and antioxidants like selenium.

Herbs and nutrients that specifically up-regulate the metabolism of hormones include broccoli sprout extract, turmeric, rosemary, B group vitamins, and phytoestrogens like flax seeds and soy lignans.

Depression

Why it occurs: Symptoms can range from mild to debilitating and may include feeling sad or down, withdrawing from your usual activities, loss of pleasure in life, cutting yourself off from friends and family, loss of appetite, low libido, or sleep problems. While we don't know the exact cause of depression, we do know that neurotransmitter function problems play a big role and these can be triggered or exacerbated by ongoing stress. Interestingly, new research has also identified poor gut health as a contributing factor.

What you can do: Natural medicine has much to offer. The nutrients 5-hydroxy tryptophan or S-adenosyl methionine act as direct precursors to serotonin, and improve mood. St John's wort is also very useful and has been shown in clinical trials to be effective in the treatment of mild to moderate depression. If you are already taking antidepressant medication, seek professional help as some herbs and nutrients are contraindicated. There are also herbs and nutrients that can support your nervous system and adrenal health and speed your recovery without interfering with your medication. See your health practitioner for professional advice.

Cystitis

Why it occurs: Ouch! Just the thought of cystitis brings tears to the eyes. Cystitis, or 'honeymoon disease', is basically a bladder infection caused by bacteria entering the urethra and making their way to the bladder, causing inflammation, pain and burning when you urinate. Most women will experience cystitis at least once in their life and for some women it can be a recurring problem.

What you can do: First and foremost, take measures to avoid getting it, including making sure you wipe from front to back when using the toilet so you avoid spreading bacteria to the urethra.

Another useful tip is to ensure that you urinate directly after sex; this helps flush away any bacteria from the opening of the urethra. Herbs for cystitis include diuretics such as couch grass, celery seed and marshmallow to soothe inflamed mucous membranes. Drinking cranberry juice regularly has been shown to reduce the risk of recurrent infection, due to a compound found in cranberries which blocks



bacteria from attaching to the epithelial cells lining the bladder. Celery and parsley are natural diuretics and can be juiced with cucumber to make an alkalising drink to help flush the bladder. If you have to take antibiotics for severe cystitis, remember to take probiotics each night to help protect your gut microbiome.

Menopausal weight gain

Why it occurs: At some point between the ages of 45 and 55, we may find that, despite our best efforts, we slowly start to gain a few kilos. This phenomenon, called 'the middle aged spread' is common, but not necessarily inevitable. At perimenopause we produce fewer hormones in the ovaries but still continue to produce small amounts of oestrogen in our fat tissue. This causes us to become oestrogen dominant, which is what contributes to fat increase around the middle, bottom, thighs, and arms. At the same time, muscle mass starts to decline, which decreases our metabolic rate, plus it's usually the time of life when career and family commitments are at their highest, so stress and high cortisol levels also contribute to weight gain.

What you can do: You need to take a multi-pronged approach to weight management at this age and address all contributing factors simultaneously. Exercise is crucial, so if you are not doing any weight-bearing exercise now is the time to start; focus on muscle development for best results. Phytoestrogens, such as those found in flax seeds, bind to oestrogen receptors and moderate the body's response to changing hormone levels. Add a couple of heaped tablespoons of freshly crushed flax seeds to food each day. Ensure you have a good diet with the proper balance of protein, healthy fat and high fibre/low glycaemic index carbohydrates with each meal. Support your adrenal function and nervous system with herbs such as rehmanna, licorice, passionflower and lemon balm.

PCOS (Polycystic ovarian syndrome)

Why it occurs: This endocrine disorder has a spectrum of symptoms, including multiple ovarian cysts, abnormal blood sugar levels, weight gain, elevated androgens, excess hair growth, acne, and irregular periods. It is a complex condition caused by a combination of genetic predisposition, dietary and lifestyle factors, and can range in severity from mild cases of acne and slightly irregular period to absent periods, obesity and type II diabetes. The good news is natural medicine and nutritional intervention have significant benefit in managing the condition.

What you can do: The first step is to ensure that you focus on a low glycaemic index, wholefoods diet, and strictly avoid processed carbohydrates and sugar. This promotes blood sugar regulation and healthy

body composition. Magnesium, chromium and inositol assist blood sugar control, as does regular weight-bearing exercise. PCOS is an oestrogen-dominant condition, where we have too much oestrogen relative to progesterone, so supporting healthy hormone metabolism by making sure the liver and bowel are working well is essential. Broccoli sprout extract, turmeric, rosemary, St Mary's thistle and B group vitamins can help with this. Stress is a major trigger factor for PCOS. I often see women in their 30s, who have never had problems with their

1 in 5 According to the most recent data from Beyond Blue, one in every five Australian women will experience depression at some point in their life.

skin or cycle, present to clinic after a particularly stressful year at work with classic PCOS symptoms. Prolonged stress disrupts adrenal hormones, including DHEA, which is associated with PCOS. So stress management and adrenal support is critical. Traditionally, we use peony, which is an ovarian herb that normalises the cycle, along with licorice, a powerful adrenal herb. Treatment varies depending on symptoms, so see your health practitioner for advice.

Bone health

Why it occurs: All women over the age of 40 should be aware of bone health; ultimately it is easier to maintain strong bones than it is to correct osteopenia or osteoporosis. Often seen as a condition that only affects elderly women, it's what we do from our forties onwards that protects our bones in our seventies and beyond. Bone density declines, along with oestrogen, as we age; however you can significantly slow this process and protect your bones through diet and exercise.

What you can do: Weight-bearing exercise is essential, plus regular walking (45 minutes, four times a week), lifting weights in the gym, and generally being physically active. A high calcium intake is important, and while dairy is a good source it doesn't suit everyone, other calcium-rich foods include fish with edible bones (e.g. sardines, tinned salmon), almonds, sesame seeds, Brazil nuts, sunflower seeds, egg yolks, seafood, and spinach. Ensuring healthy vitamin D levels is essential. Daily exposure to sunlight helps, as will foods like fish, seafood and egg yolks. Vitamin D levels should be monitored at your annual check-up, and supplement where necessary. If you have a family history of osteoporosis, see your health practitioner for a bone health plan. ✨

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