



How Herbs Can Help Women Have A Pleasant Menstrual Cycle

Chinese medicine teaches that your periods should be a pleasant experience. If you are reading these words in disbelief, you are not alone. Most women in western culture grew up believing, expecting really, to experience discomfort and pain during their period. Chinese medicine's radical departure from western beliefs is grounded in the idea that menstrual pain and discomfort point us to areas in our life and physical body that are out of balance. The pain and discomfort are markers that show us not only where to look, but how to address what we find.

Chinese medicine offers something that the western system of healing does not, an explanatory framework for the complex set of issues that can influence a woman's menstrual cycle. Understanding the causative factors then points to appropriate food choices, lifestyle, and herb choices that can alleviate common menstrual problems. These strategies are gentler, less heroic and less invasive than those that are sometimes used in western medicine. There are many traditional Chinese and western herbal formulas that work very effectively to regulate the menstrual cycle, eliminate pain, restore balance and make things pleasant (either again or for the first time).

With the problems women usually face during menstruation, it is easy to forget that our periods are a sacred time of cleansing and renewal. The menstrual cycle is a unique process that connects women in a direct way to the rhythms of the natural world. It is a time of introspection and reflection when our energy will naturally be lower than usual and will be drawn down to the area of the womb. Feeling slightly fuzzy or light headed, as well as having less energy to project out in the world is completely normal and should be honored with quiet down time.

Describing every possible pattern of imbalance in Chinese medicine that can cause menstrual problems is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this article will present some of the most common patterns women usually experience. It is important to tune into your body's natural cycle and be aware of what is "normal" for you and your cycle (ie color and amount of blood, length of cycle, etc.), knowing that for many women, "normal" may actually seem to be a chronic pattern of imbalance. It is also important to remember that it can take anywhere from 3-6 months to create lasting results with menstrual cycle changes.

There are several common causes of menstrual pain, including emotional strain or trauma, chronic stress and overwork, as well as chronic exposure to cold and dampness either environmentally or by diets high in foods that tend to dampen and cool the body (like raw foods, salads, fruit juices). These causes point to the importance of having safe and helpful outlets to process and express emotions,



including journaling, talking with friends, to more physical expressions such as exercise or creative practices such as dance or art.

Common Menstrual Patterns and Strategies

Because of the complexities of women's reproductive anatomy and cycles, there are many opportunities for Qi (literally vital life force energy) and blood to become stuck or stagnate. Qi, blood, or literally cold energy are common types of energy that stagnate and cause menstrual pain. Qi and blood can also easily become depleted, or deficient. As all women know, there are many different types of cramping pain, ranging from minor or dull pain to severe stabbing pain that can be debilitating. To keep things sufficiently complex, know that it is not uncommon to experience one or more patterns of imbalance at the same time.

What is traditionally defined as pre-menstrual syndrome, including mood swings, irritability, depression, cramping immediately before or during the first day or two of bleeding, breast and abdominal distention, breast tenderness, irregular or scanty blood flow, loose stools or alternating loose and firm stools, is a common pattern that can happen when Qi becomes stuck. Herbal formulas designed to move or regulate the Qi can be used to effectively deal with these symptoms. Intense, stabbing, bearing down pain that occurs in a fixed location that is alleviated by passing clots or having a bowel movement is due to blood stagnating. Cramping pain with a sore back that is relieved by the application of heat is due to cold stagnating. One very effective strategy that can help to prevent and alleviate stagnation is to engage in a form of movement such as yoga, belly dance, or any dance that isolates and moves the pelvic region (hula dancing, salsa, etc.)

When blood or energy becomes stuck, it means that certain organs are not getting the energy or blood they need, which can deplete them, leading to what is known as Qi or blood deficiency. But, the reverse is also true that depleted blood and Qi can cause energy to become stuck because there is simply not enough energy or blood to create a flow of movement. This translates into such physical symptoms as dull pain relieved by pressure or massage, scanty or watery blood, pale complexion, tiredness and low energy, dizziness, and loose stools. Herbal formulas and food are given to build the blood and energy.

There are preventive strategies women can use to maintain healthy blood and energy. Eating foods high in calcium and magnesium, such as dark green leafy vegetables, yogurt, and seaweeds, is important. Also regularly drinking herbal teas, such as nettles, oatstraw, red raspberry leaf, or dandelion leaf, that have high content of minerals such as calcium and iron is also a good approach. Another



good preventive food strategy is to eliminate foods that can weaken or stress digestion such as coffee, fried or greasy foods, iced drinks, and raw foods. Most importantly, know that your period can be pleasant.

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