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ACHES & CLAIMS

Can Herbs Root Out Menstrual Cramps?

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For when Motrin isn't enough, some alternative-health experts recommend Chinese herbs to relieve menstrual symptoms. Evidence that herb cocktails can ease period pain is preliminary, but some physicians say herbs are worth a try.

Many women experience painful cramping during their menstrual cycles, which can be so severe it interferes with normal daily activities. It can often be relieved with anti-inflammatory drugs, exercise and improved diet. Some women try hot water bottles or heating pads. Birth-control pills, prescribed by a doctor, can also help.

Chinese preparations for menstrual symptoms vary but can include different herbs. Common ingredients include Danggui, sometimes called angelica root, and a mixture of other roots such as red and white peony roots. The cocktails are ingested in pill form, or in a bitter, pungent tea-like mixture, which some herbalists believe is more effective.

The herbs can be purchased in stores, or dispensed by an acupuncturist, herbalist or naturopathic physician. Chinese herb cocktails are used to treat both menstrual cramps and premenstrual syndrome, and are often tailored to a specific patient's symptoms, says Manhattan herbalist Jill Blakeway. For example, a citrus peel called Qing pi would be added to the cocktail if a woman's symptoms include tender breasts.

No one really knows how the herbs work, if they do, but traditional theory holds the herbs are purported to help blood circulate, which may ease cramps. A scientific analysis of 39 clinical trials including a total of 3,475 women found "promising" evidence that Chinese herb cocktails can relieve menstrual pain effectively, compared with other methods, including anti-inflammatories, heat and other alternative therapies. But the review, published earlier this month by the Cochrane Collaboration, an international network of scientists, cautioned that many of the trials were poorly designed, making it difficult to draw a firm conclusion.

"The literature is suggestive of benefit, but there is not definitive proof," says Mary L. Hardy, a physician who specializes in herbal medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It's worth a try, especially if you get someone who is very skilled and can modify the formula for you individually." While you can simply buy a bottle of herbs, she adds, you're more likely to get good results from going to someone who knows how best to use them and who also counsels you on lifestyle changes, such as better diet.

No serious side effects of Chinese herbs were found in the Cochrane review, but the authors cautioned the trials may not have been rigorous enough to find them.


If you do have severe menstrual cramps, particularly if they are sudden, it's important to see a physician to see if there is an underlying reason for the pain, such as endometriosis or fibroids.

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