

HEDGEROW HERBALS

The quarterly newsletter from your local herbalist - Julie Dore
Articles, news, recipes and tips for a healthy you

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FREE

Welcome to the spring edition which includes information on fertility, pregnancy and childbirth

Fertility & Conception



In the UK, 1 in 6 couples have fertility problems and the figures are rising. In many cases there is an underlying cause and in 40% of cases the fertility problems are connected to the quality of the sperm so it is not just a female issue. If you have not conceived

after 6-9 months of trying then GPs will usually offer you investigations. There are often long waiting times between seeing various consultants, having tests and treatments and is, by its very nature, an extremely stressful time – not ideal when stress is another negative factor when it comes to conceiving.

Whether there is a diagnosed condition or a failure to conceive without any detectable problem, herbs and diet can greatly improve the chances of conception. This is such a complex area, it is not recommended you try and treat yourself, especially as a number of herbs are contraindicated in pregnancy so it is best to see a medical herbalist. However below are outlines of treatments of both common causes of infertility and where no cause has been found.

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

This condition not only causes infertility but can manifest itself in irregular periods, weight problems, hirsutism, high blood fats and poor blood sugar regulation. Untreated it can lead to diabetes in later life, a fact not often relayed to patients. There is a complex relationship between the reproductive hormones and insulin in this condition and diet can make an

amazing difference to a sufferer's overall health and can often have a dramatic impact on their fertility. It is vital to follow a diet that excludes refined sugar and carbohydrates so no white bread, rice, cakes, biscuits or potatoes (i.e. follow the GI diet). Herbs used include liquorice, peony, saw palmetto and chaste berry that modulate hormone levels and also insulin controlling herbs like cinnamon and goat's rue.



Peony

Endometriosis

This condition is caused by tissue from the uterus lining migrating into the pelvic cavity. This tissue then responds to hormonal stimulation during the monthly cycle causing inflammation, pain and cysts. Symptoms can include pain during periods, ovulation or intercourse. If the tissue attaches itself to the bladder or bowel it can cause pain when urinating or defecating. It can lead to infertility because of adhesions on the ovaries and in the fallopian tubes.

Herbal treatment includes hormonal regulation, pelvic anti-inflammatories and astringents, plus immune system support as this encourages the body to deal with the tissue. Once the endometriosis starts to improve then the inclusion of uterine tonics and hormone normalising herbs helps to

prepare the body for a possible pregnancy. Good diet is vital to help the body recover, and exercise helps improve pelvic circulation. The Endometriosis Society produces a newsletter containing lots of help and information.

Fibroids

These are benign tumours that grow in the muscles of the uterus in response to stimulation by oestrogen and can prevent implantation of a fertilised egg. They also cause very heavy and painful periods and, constipation or incontinence if they impinge on the bowels or bladder, and sometimes pain on intercourse.

Herbal treatment is aimed at reducing fibroid size and associated symptoms. Anti-tumour herbs like Thuja are used in conjunction with pelvic tonics such as yarrow and lady's mantle, plus chaste berry to modulate oestrogen and, if needed, anti-haemorrhagic herbs like shepherd's purse.



An important combination for pelvic health –Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla vul.*)

Castor oil, warmed and laid on the stomach as a compress, reduces tumours and cysts. Foods rich in plant oestrogens block oestrogen receptors on the fibroids but have a much weaker effect than the body's own oestrogen so resulting in less growth of the tumour. Therefore, eat plenty of beans, peas, pulses and whole grains. There is also evidence that reducing red meat and dairy foods and increasing fresh fruit and vegetables is beneficial. Cabbage particularly is said to be protective against hormone-mediated tumours. Using herbs and diet is a slow but steady process but can prevent the need for surgery.

Low Sperm Count or Motility

It is vital to improve overall healthy and this includes not smoking and reducing alcohol and caffeine intake as all three are directly linked to low sperm counts and motility. Zinc is vital for sperm production and is found in pumpkins and shellfish.

There are several herbs that can improve sperm quality, including ginseng (but not to be used in cases of high blood pressure), damiana, astragalus, epimedium and black cohosh. Some laboratory studies indicate that Echinacea, ginkgo and St John's Wort reduce the sperm's ability to penetrate the egg but there have been no studies to see if this effect is replicated in the human body.

Wearing loose underwear and not taking excessively hot baths can also help as ideally the testicles should be slightly cooler than the body for optimum sperm production.

Ovulating & no reason for not conceiving

In this case, a herbalist would use tonics, both for the reproductive organs and, if appropriate, for the whole person particularly if they are emotional or stressed. Examples include lady's mantle, which helps ovulation, raspberry leaf or motherwort as uterine tonics and hormonal balances such as red clover, dong quai and peony.

If libido is a problem there are a number of herbs that can help resolve this including damiana, saw palmetto and tonics like ashwaganda and siberian ginseng.

NB Herbs and diet can make a big difference to other problems associated with the reproductive cycle including PMS and irregular, painful or heavy periods. See future editions or contact a medical herbalist.

Preparing for Pregnancy

Many studies have shown that being well nourished and free of toxins dramatically increases the chances of successful conception, maintaining the pregnancy, producing a healthy baby and improving its future health. Other benefits include less morning sickness and a stronger mother after the birth. And the preparations don't just apply to the prospective mother but Dad too! It takes 4 months for the sperm to develop and mature so prospective Dads should stop smoking (linked to childhood cancer) and drinking alcohol and eat at least five fruit and vegetables portions per day.

Women should avoid chemicals, eat organic food, avoid plastic lined cans, filter water, and use natural cosmetics, stop smoking and drinking alcohol. Reduce intake of red meat and dairy as these often contain hormones

that can disrupt fertility. Soya contains a chemical that prevents the docking of the egg and sperm so avoid it if possible and certainly during the fertile period. It is also advisable to take a good quality pregnancy supplement.



Herbal Medicine in Pregnancy

Women throughout the ages have used herbs and plants to treat safely a number of health problems that arise during pregnancy. However, it is advisable not to take any medicines in the first trimester unless absolutely necessary. The main exemption is morning sickness.

Ginger is brilliant for treating nausea. You can suck pieces of crystallized ginger or make a tea using 1g of powder to a cup of hot water, take up to three times a day. You can combine herbs that stimulate digestion and support the liver by making a tea to drink 3-6 times a day. Experiment with a blend that you like, a choice of chamomile, peppermint, lavender, dandelion leaf, meadowsweet, wild yam root or lemon balm.

During pregnancy progesterone levels rise and cause ligaments and sphincters to relax leading to heartburn and increasing the likelihood of contracting cystitis. For heartburn, make slippery elm powder into a soothing drink, 2g to a cup of milk and water or take it as tablets before meals. Sipping teas of marshmallow root, meadowsweet or chamomile throughout the day can also help. As a preventative measure for cystitis, drink copious amounts of dilute homemade barley water, mineral water or herbal teas to flush bacteria from the urinary tract. A good combination would be horsetail (a urinary disinfectant) with marshmallow leaf to soothe and lemon balm for pain relief, up to 6 cups per day. Sitting in a bath of chamomile tea can be very soothing, or use it to make warm compresses to apply to back, abdomen or bladder area.

Other herbal remedies include:

Stretch marks - apply wheat germ oil with lavender essential oil added, 20 drops to 50ml of oil once a day OR infused oil of marigold

Thrush – Calendula (marigold) cream or infusion to which you can add Tea Tree or Echinacea

Constipation – take one teaspoon of psyllium husks or linseeds soaked in warm water for 15 minutes or try roasted dandelion root “coffee”. DO NOT use laxative herbs such as senna, cascara or yellow dock as they can cause contractions.



Calendula officinalis

Haemorrhoids and Varicose Veins – apply witch hazel and horse chestnut cream but most importantly take preventative measures. Raise legs and feet twice a day for 10-15mins and take gentle walks and swimming for exercise.

Anxiety or stress – oat straw, lemon balm, lime flowers, vervain or chamomile as a tea; blend together to make a mix you enjoy

In the final 8 weeks you can take herbs to prepare your body for the birth. One recipe is equal parts of raspberry leaves, motherwort, hawthorn and half part black cohosh, taken as a tea three times daily. If your Braxton Hicks contractions increase reduce the dose. A strong infusion of raspberry leaf made into ice cubes to suck in labour is beneficial. If you have any doubts or have more complex health problems, always contact a qualified medical herbalist. We cannot act as midwives but can provide herbs to help with labour, dilate the cervix and encourage labour once you are past the due date (much better than being induced!).



Post Partum

Congratulations, you have a wonderful healthy baby but it is important to heal yourself, after all you've been through a dramatic and very physically demanding time. There are several ways to use herbs to speed your recovery.

- To heal the perineum, bathe the area in an infusion of comfrey and calendula to which you can add lavender essential oil
- To encourage milk flow, drink teas of nettle (something farmers traditional gave to cows to increase milk yield plus packed with iron), fennel, milk thistle and raspberry leaf
- Treat sore nipples with calendula ointment (also great used on baby to prevent and treat nappy rash)
- For mastitis use cabbage or rhubarb leaves, soften first with a warm iron and place whole leaf over breast inside bra

If the "baby blues" lasts for more than a few days you may be suffering from post natal depression, again something your herbalist can treat. You take preventative measures by eating foods rich in omega 3 essential fatty acids during the third trimester (oily fish 2-3 times per week). Eat foods containing tryptophan such as turkey, chicken, beans and lentils, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, walnuts and cottage cheese. Tryptophan is used by the body to make serotonin, the brain chemical that promotes a sense of well being. Zinc and vitamin B6 are important as low intake is linked to depression. Many illnesses can be linked back to child birth and a post natal tonic prescribed by your herbalist could prevent these.

Babies and children respond well to the gentle holistic way herbal medicines work. Babies can even be treated by bathing them in herbal infusions as they absorb the health properties of the plants through their thin skin. Future editions of this newsletter will cover herbal medicine for children.

DIARY DATES

Meet me on one of my plant safaris this spring or summer when I will be telling you about the medicinal uses and folklore of plants growing at these beautiful nature reserves.

- **Sunday 22nd April & 9th September** (2pm) at **Sandy RSPB HQ** Tickets include entry to reserve – phone 01767 680541 to reserve a place
- **Sunday 29th April & 24th June** (2pm) **Milton Country Park** Tickets £5 adults, £3 children – phone 01223 420060 to reserve a place
- **Sunday 20th May** (2pm) **West Stow Country Park**, Bury St Edmunds Tickets £5 adults, £3 children phone 01284 728718 (as the park contains a reconstruction of an Anglo Saxon village, herbs used in this period will feature prominently)
- **Sunday 10th June** (11pm) **RSPB Reserve Lakenheath** phone 01842 862036 Adults £3 children £1 RSPB members half price
- **Saturday 23rd June** 10am-4pm **Wicken Fen** - morning walk and afternoon workshop using plants from the Fen to make medicines. Contact 01353 720274 – booking is essential



COMING UP IN THE SUMMER:

- **Herb Walk in St Ives** including the medicinal plant garden
- **Herbal Workshops** –making your own herbal medicines to treat common everyday ailments

MORE DETAILS NEXT TIME!

Visit the Hedgerow Herbals website www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk.

For advice, comments or topics you would like to see in future newsletters contact **Julie Dore** at **Physic** Oakington Therapy Centre Oakington Road, Girton, CB3 0QH. Telephone 01223 237459, or email reception@physic.co.uk or see www.physic.co.uk

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