

# HEDGEROW HERBALS

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

**AUTUMN 2006**

**FREE**

Welcome to the autumn 2006 edition which includes information on the menopause (including the safety of HRT and one herb commonly used to treat it, Black Cohosh) plus help for insomnia sufferers and treating colds

## The Menopause – HRT & other safety issues

Feared or dreaded by some, welcomed by others but perhaps all women should take comfort in the words of the poet John Donne,

*“No Spring nor Summer beauty hath such grace  
As I have seen in one Autumnal face”*

In the west the menopause has received very bad PR with post menopausal women referred to as dullards, castrates, a misery to themselves or suffering the horror of a living decay. No wonder many turn to the miracle “cure” HRT. Except it isn't and it doesn't! Drug company propaganda (particularly on fears of osteoporosis) has meant the some women have taken the drug for decades without there ever being any trial or study to ensure its long term safety. Finally in 2001 came the Million Woman Study in the UK where women having mammograms were questioned about HRT use and links were discovered to increased rates of breast cancer. Two other studies reporting in 2002 in the US called the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) and Heart and Estrogen Replacement Study (HERS) both confirmed the increased cancer risks and revealed no benefits in heart health with taking HRT. The only positive benefit identified was a reduced decline in bone density for women using HRT long term. With the increased cancer risks, GPs now take long term users off HRT, some with brutal suddenness, and then many women discover their menopausal symptoms came back with a vengeance. So this is no miracle cure just a postponement at best!

A number of women turn to herbal remedies in particular Black Cohosh for help. Now the safety of that too has been called into question in a recent report by the MRHA (Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency). This report needs to be understood in context.

- Toxicity from Black Cohosh is very rare - **31** possible cases out of **9 million** treatment days from over the counter sales. Of these 31 cases all but **4 individuals** were already taking other medication for liver disease
- All the cases were individuals taking over the counter (OTC) products. They had not received professional medical advice before using the product
- It has been shown in tests that not all OTC medications sold as Black Cohosh contain only *Cimicifuga racemosa* (which is becoming endangered in the wild) but are mixtures of other related plants – this raises safety issues

(NB I use Black Cohosh grown at an organic farm in Rutland which is regularly tested for its level of active ingredients)



Black Cohosh *Cimicifuga racemosa*

THEREFORE my advice would be **DO NOT TAKE** Black Cohosh if:

- ✘ you have had, or are currently suffering from, hepatitis or any other liver disease

- ✘ you regularly consume, or have in the past consumed, more than the recommended levels of alcohol as this damages the liver
- ✘ are taking any medication for liver problems

And finally, only use confirmed and tested products.

**This raises an important question:**

*Why should you see a medical herbalist when there's a two for the price of one offer on herbal medicine at the health food shop?....*

...**BECAUSE** you get a fully trained, professional to look after you health - not a shop assistant with a catalogue. Your health matters so it is imperative to use all medicines safely- there is a popular misconception that herbal medicine is safe and harmless. **WRONG!** Plants contain chemicals that affect your body, if they didn't they wouldn't work. Herbs can interact with conventional medicine or influence other medical conditions, as the Black Cohosh example illustrates. St John's Wort, another very good herb for alleviating hot flushes, also improves liver efficiency and cannot be taken in combination with drugs that require certain concentrations in the blood e.g. Warfarin, immunosuppressant drugs or chemotherapy treatments.

**Treating the Menopause naturally**

There are many other herbal combinations that can successfully relieve the symptoms of the menopause and I find that different women respond to different combinations and solutions. Stress makes flushes worse because, as the ovaries are reducing production of oestrogen, the adrenal glands are increasing theirs and stress disrupts this process. In these cases I use liquorice (if blood pressure is normal) or borage as adrenal tonics. Astragalus is another general tonic herb that also helps reduce flushes. Sometimes palpitations are a symptom and here motherwort and hawthorn are very beneficial. The Asian plants schisandra and dong quai (we western herbalists are not proud we use any plant that works!) are a good combination with very positive results. Red clover is the only herb that contains significant amounts of plant oestrogens and I have found it useful for some patients.



Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*

Changes in diet and lifestyle are also important. The menopause is a time of great physiological change in the body, just like puberty was, so you should take special care of yourself. Eating foods rich in plant oestrogens is very beneficial and many supermarkets now sell bread containing soya and other grains that are rich in these. Eat pulses, beans and peas, such as chick peas, green beans or kidney beans. Many of these can also be grown as sprouted seeds (available from most garden centres) and added to soups, salads, stir-fries or juices. All whole grains including oats, wheat, barley, linseed and corn are also good sources as are members of the cabbage family, sesame and sunflower seeds, yeast, carrots and fennel. As well as introducing these foods into your diet you should try and reduce refined sugars and carbohydrates as they unbalance and stress your system. Cut down on stimulants such as caffeine - it also depletes calcium from the body – alcohol & spicy hot foods.

Ensure you have time for yourself and try relaxing forms of exercise like yoga, Tai Chi or Pilates. Wear natural fibres like cotton and silk to make you feel more comfortable if a flush occurs and always drink plenty of water to replace fluids lost in sweats.

**NEXT ISSUE – AVOIDING OSTEOPOROSIS**

**Hibernation? I just need a good night's sleep!**

Do you suffer from the torment of insomnia? It's a growing problem, with over 30% of the population suffering at any time, due in part to the busy, stressful lives we lead. As sleeping tablets can be addictive doctors are often reluctant to prescribe them but there is much you can do to help yourself including using herbs.

There are two types of sleep, REM (Rapid Eye Movement), when we lay down memories and brain repair occurs, and non-REM. Insomniacs will usually get some sleep but it is of the non-REM type which leaves the body and mind feeling tired and sluggish. In the short term sleep deprivation can have dangerous consequences e.g. driving ability and it will also leave you feeling miserable and sluggish. In the long term lack of sleep, whether through insomnia or because you are just not getting sufficient sleep, will cause serious health problems. It can lower your immune system, cause aches, pains and even heart disease.

There are several steps you can take to get into a healthy sleep routine.

- Have a regular time for going to bed and get up at the same time even if you haven't had a good night's sleep to boost your body's natural rhythms. Do relaxing things in the hour before bed and don't over stimulate the mind with high octane films, computer games or even crosswords and puzzles
- Avoid taking naps during the day

- Make your bedroom a sanctuary to sleep so move out the computer and TV and make sure the room is dark, comfortable and quiet –and get a quality mattress!
- Don't eat stimulants after mid afternoon so no caffeine and that includes coffee, some fizzy drinks, cocoa and chocolate, and no alcohol and nicotine
- Don't eat a heavy meal less than 3 hours before bedtime. Do include carbohydrate foods e.g. pasta, rice or potatoes, in your early evening meal as they encourage the body to make growth and repair hormones which are active during sleep
- Conversely don't go to bed on an empty stomach or eat spicy, protein or sugary foods
- Don't exercise before bed as the released endorphins will act as stimulants, but exercise in the day will help you to sleep
- Write down all the things on your mind so you can stop them circling round your brain as you try to sleep – now they will be waiting for you tomorrow
- Don't toss and turn. If after 30 minutes sleep eludes you than get up, read, make a herbal tea, practise yoga or meditation, listen to a relaxation tape or gentle music and try again.

### Diet and Herbs to Help you Sleep

Some foods contain tryptophan, a brain chemical associated with sleep. Turkey, milk & lettuce all contain high amounts and need to be eaten with a carbohydrate food such as bread to encourage the release of tryptophan. Use whole grain bread as it is a source of Vitamin B6, a lack of which can be a factor in insomnia. Apricots and apricot jam are used in traditional European folk medicine as nerve tonics that combat insomnia. If you take Vitamin B supplements take these in the morning as they are known to cause sleep problems if taken at night.

Fresh hops made into a herb pillow help with sleep but they must be changed every few months as the hops lose their potency over time. A few drops of lavender, clary sage or chamomile essential oil on the pillow can also help you to relax. TIP use one for a few weeks and then change it as your system becomes attuned to an oil over time and it becomes less effective. You can use lavender or chamomile for children, putting a few drops in a bowl of water and standing near a radiator.

There are probably more over the counter herbal preparation for insomnia than almost any other condition and many people try and self medicate. They are generic mixes that may help but they are not tailored to **you** or the cause of **your** insomnia. A medial herbalist will do a full case history to establish the causes and treat those as well as the symptoms. Here are four (fictitious) patients.

*Lucy* is 51 and going through the menopause. She drops off to sleep easily but is waking several times with sweats and then finds it hard to get back to sleep. She is exhausted by morning. Lucy has a healthy diet, exercises regularly and practises yoga for relaxation. Her family life is good if hectic (three teenagers!). Her sleep problem is caused by the swirling hormonal changes of the menopause. I would give her herbs to help balance her hormones (plus dietary advice on oestrogen rich foods see above), and calm her circulation. A combination might include Black Cohosh, Hawthorn, Red Clover and Agnus castus.

*Richard* is 35, a sales manger in a high-octane industry. He lives for his job, is scaling the career ladder but after work loves to play hard as well. His mind is still racing when he goes to bed and its taking him hours to get to sleep. He has been prescribed sleeping pills by his GP and who also discovered his blood pressure is high. Richard is over-stimulated, drinking too much coffee and eating too much refined sugars and carbohydrates. He would benefit from calming herbs both during the day and at night, herbs that will also help his blood pressure. Herbs like valerian can produce a relaxing sleep BUT must not be taken with sleeping drugs as one may potentate the other. Valerian works best if taken for a period of time rather just on a night you can't sleep. I would combine this with herbs like cramp bark and lime blossom, which would also help lower his blood pressure. He also needs tonic herbs for his overworked adrenal (stress) glands, Borage or Siberian Ginseng but not liquorice or Korean (panax) ginseng due to his elevated blood pressure. I would also advise him on a more relaxing routine in the evening and suggest improvements to his diet.



*Valerian officinalis*

*Sarah* is a 23 year old media student living away from home for the first time and recently split from her long time boyfriend. She can get to sleep but finds she is waking everyday around 4am and can't get back to sleep. She is feeling increasingly that she can't cope. Sarah is suffering from depression and early morning waking is one sign of this (although it can also mean you have low blood sugars so if you have no other signs of depression try having a carbohydrate snack before bedtime and see if that helps). I would give her herbs to improve her mood e.g. St John's Wort, as long as she is not taking the contraceptive pill, possibly Lemon Balm,

Oat Straw and perhaps Rose to help her with the emotional loss of her boyfriend. Hops, found in many sleep mixes are contra-indicated in depression as they can make it worse. I would encourage her to take a form of exercise she enjoys and, most importantly, stop self medicating the depression with refined sugars. Instead she should eat foods that lift the mood like turkey, cheese, nuts, yeast, fruit (especially bananas) and green vegetables and to reduce alcohol.

*Gerald* is 63, working but looking forward to his retirement. He is finding it difficult to concentrate at work because he is waking up 3-4 times in the night needing to urinate & consequently feels tired all the time. The reason for *Gerald's* nocturnal problem is most likely to be Benign Prostate Hyperplasia (BPH). If not already diagnosed I would recommend he have it checked by his GP just to be on the safe side as in rare case the growth in the prostate can be malignant. He needs herbs to treat the prostate and so reduce his need to urinate. Herbal combinations of Saw Palmetto, Nettle Root, Thuja coupled with herbs that improve the health of the pelvic region would benefit him. Combinations of these herbs have been shown in trials to be just as effective as drugs in mild to moderate BPH but without the unfortunate side effects. I would also tell him to eat pumpkin seeds and eat a whole food diet rich in fruit and vegetables especially tomatoes and, like Lucy, eat oestrogen rich foods. (No you don't turn into a woman!).

SO if self medication doesn't work (and by the way most of the chamomile tea sold in supermarkets is not strong enough to have a real effect on your sleep) then consider seeing a medical herbalist for a tailored prescription – you only have your sleeplessness to lose!

### Second Chance to read about.....

In my very first newsletter in 2004 I wrote about colds. You can see a copy on the website [www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk](http://www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk), here is a summarised version.

### COLDS

“Don't kiss me, I've got a cold”, a common cry as the winter wraps us all in its chilly grey blanket but actually it is not kissing but shaking hands that spreads colds.

There are over 200 different cold viruses which is why a single vaccine against the common cold is not effective - it's just too common! As it's a virus, antibiotics have no effect either. The viruses live in our nose and can be spread by airborne droplets when we sneeze or cough and when we touch or blow our nose. Then our hands become covered with the virus infecting everything and everybody we touch. Washing hands thoroughly and often, especially after blowing your nose, is vital to stop the spread.

So if there is no vaccine or cure, what can we do to prevent the misery of a cold? The most important way is to ensure your immune system, the main defence against any infection, is functioning properly. Tiredness, stress and poor nutrition deplete your immunity. Eat foods high in vitamin C and zinc to revive your immunity- kiwi fruit, pineapple, pumpkin and sunflower seeds are good examples.



*Echinacea puperea* or Coneflower

If you catch a cold avoid foods that encourage the body to make mucus. These include bananas, anything made from milk and, surprisingly, large oranges (satsumas are OK). Take a high quality preparation of Echinacea (it should make your mouth tingle) at the first signs to boost your natural defences. Garlic is anti-viral and bacterial and it reduces catarrh. Add one crushed fresh clove to the juice of half a lemon, add a tablespoon of honey, top up with hot water and take several times a day. A tea of elderflower, thyme and peppermint (singularly or mixed) will help reduce catarrh, protect against chest infections and lower temperatures. Fresh ginger root sliced and mixed with hot water and fresh lemon juice helps to relieve the aches, pains and nausea of a cold. Most importantly, give your body a chance to rest and recover.

Visit the Hedgerow Herbals website [www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk](http://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](mailto:reception@physic.co.uk).

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