

Herbs for Fertility and Pregnancy

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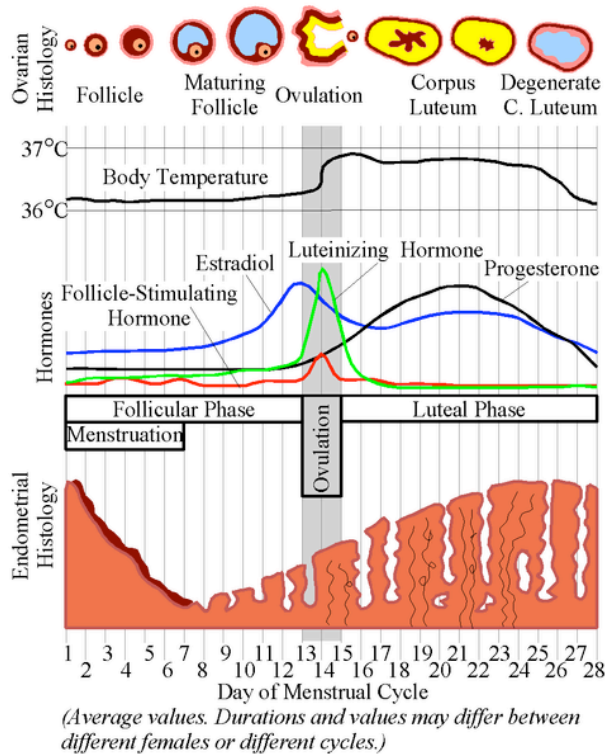


Plants are strong medicine. Please use them with respect and awareness. The information contained herein is intended for educational purposes only and should not be used in place of diagnosis and treatment by a qualified healthcare practitioner.

Menstruation: a practical look

The Biology Behind Menstruation

The menstrual cycle is beautifully complex. The following terms and definitions will help you to understand your moon cycle:



The menstrual cycle is divided into two phases:

Follicular phase – includes the time when menstruation occurs followed by the growth and thickening of the endometrium (uterine lining), which lasts between 10 – 14 days. Ovulation occurs, and a single egg is released into the fallopian tube. This is when conception is most likely.

Luteal phase - The corpus luteum (the remnant of the follicle where the ovum developed) begins to secrete progesterone and estrogen. The endometrium begins to grow glandular structures and blood vessels that are capable of nourishing a developing embryo. If fertilization does not occur the corpus luteum dies, leading to a decline in the levels of hormones. This in turn leads to the shedding of the endometrium that is dependant on these hormones for its development and health. Menstruation occurs.

<i>Ovum</i>	the egg produced by the ovary each menstrual cycle
<i>Follicle</i>	the structure in the ovary that can contain the ovum if development proceeds to ovulation.
<i>Corpus luteum</i>	the 'yellow body' that is the structure left after ovulation has occurred and which is responsible for the secretion of estrogen and progesterone.
<i>Follicle stimulating hormone (FSH)</i>	a pituitary gland hormone that stimulates the growth of follicles.
<i>Lutenizing Hormone (LH)</i>	the hormone produced by the pituitary gland that sustains the corpus luteum.
<i>Gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH)</i>	a hormone secreted by the hypothalamus that initiates the release of LH and FSH from the pituitary gland.
<i>Endometrium</i>	the lining of the uterus that is shed each menstruation.

Fertility

Nutrition

Omega oils

Prostaglandins are local hormone-like substances involved in the regulation of ovulation, menstruation, labor, as well as other non-gynecological events. In general they help ensure the normal order and balance of your body's functions. When they are imbalanced this can lead to many common gynecological complaints. The Omega oils (3-6-9) are essential to the proper production and balance of prostaglandins in the body.

Common sources of high omega oils (especially Omega 3):

- Fish oils
- Flax seed oil
- Evening Primrose oil
- Sardines
- Wild fish (especially Salmon and Halibut)
- Wild or grass fed meats
- Pumpkin seeds

Magnesium

Magnesium is involved in at least three hundred different enzymes and body chemicals (Bergner, 1997). It plays a major role in the healthy function of our bones, heart, and muscles. Magnesium is the most common deficiency found in the US diet. Magnesium can significantly help many reproductive problems.

Some food sources of magnesium:

- Dark leafy greens
- Buckwheat flour
- Rye flour
- Almonds
- Kelp
- Halibut

Folic Acid

Folic Acid is a nutrient required in healthy cellular growth. The Pill affects folic acid absorption, along with many of the B vitamins and zinc, negatively. Deficiency in folic acid has been shown to lead to cervical dysplasia (abnormal pap smears) and an increase in susceptibility to cervicitis. If you are taking the Pill, it is important to also take a folic acid supplement and multivitamin. Since it is essential nutrient for cell growth, it is extremely important during pregnancy. As many as 60% of pregnancy woman in the United States are deficient in folic acid.

Some food sources of folic acid:

Chicken liver
Brewer's yeast
Lentils
Dark leafy greens
Orange juice
Broccoli
Brussels sprouts
Bok choy
Leeks

Multivitamins

It is increasingly difficult to impossible to get all of our nutrients from our food alone. Many vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients play an important role in reproductive health. Many women find a significant improvement in their menstrual health and overall fertility simply by making dietary changes and taking a good quality multivitamin.

Vitamins and minerals specific for fertility:

Women

Folic Acid
Vitamin C
B vitamins, especially B5
Vitamin E
Magnesium

Men

Carnitine
Zinc
Magnesium
Vitamin C
Vitamin E

Nutritive Herbs

Many of the vitamins and minerals necessary for menstrual health are found abundantly in many nutritive herbs. Our bodies in this form more easily absorb nutrients as well. While powders can also be taken, teas/infusions are the most common and best way of taking these herbs.

Some nutritive herbs include:

Nettles
Red Clover
Raspberry Leaf
Oat Straw

Herbs for Fertility

Raspberry Leaf (Rubus idaeus)

Raspberry both relaxes and strengthens/tonifies the uterine and pelvic muscles. It is an excellent nourishing tonic high in many important vitamins and trace minerals especially important for women. It is particularly helpful for heavy bleeding and anemic conditions as well as dysmenorrhea when taken over time. Rubus also is known for promoting fertility and preparing the womb for childbirth and is safe to take throughout pregnancy. Combines well with Ladies Mantle, Rose and Yarrow for astringing bleeding; Nettles and Oatstraw for nutritive properties and during pregnancy; Vitex for hormone balance; Blessed thistle, Crampbark, Ginger, Peony or Dong Quai for painful periods.

Dose:

1-3 cups of the infusion daily. Let steep in the water 4 hours up to overnight to get the important nutritive qualities of the herb.

Caution:

No known toxicity. In first trimester of pregnancy only use if recommended by midwife or qualified practitioner.

Lady's Mantle (Alchemilla vulgaris)

Alchemilla has a strong affinity to women and especially the female reproductive system. Ladies mantle tends to do what is needed in the system and is hormone balancing. It promotes fertility especially after prior trauma by helping the normal involution of the uterus. Combines well with raspberry leaf for fertility, and *Vitex angus-castus* for balancing the hormones.

Dose:

Hot Infusion: 1-2 cups

Tincture: 1 dropperful 2x day

Externally: Use tea infusion as douche or poultice for breasts

Caution:

Do not use during pregnancy

Don Quai (Angelica sinensis)

This wonderful herb is said to be one of the most widely used herbs in the world. And though it has many uses, it has become known as a female herb for its effectiveness in tonifying the uterus. Though it is gentler than its Western cousin Angelica, it is best used in combination with other herbs. It can help infertility, especially if it is caused by lack of uterine tone. It is nourishing and tonifying to the blood and increases blood circulation to the pelvic area. Therefore, it is excellent for women who are anemic, weak, and postpartum use.

Dose:

1-3 droppersful, 2-4 times a day. Discontinue use one week before period.

Cautions:

Do not take during pregnancy. Do not use if prone to heavy bleeding. Do not take if on blood thinning medication. Should not be used if you have endometriosis or uterine fibroids.

Red Clover (Trifolium pratense)

Another wonderfully nourishing herb, red clover has an affinity for women. It is very high in vitamin and mineral content that are specifically beneficial to the uterus. It helps to restore and normalize hormonal functions that can promote fertility.

Dose:

Infusion 2-4 cups daily

Tincture 1-3 droppersful 2-3x daily

Caution:

NOT for use during pregnancy or when using blood thinning agents.

Rose (Rosa spp.)

The Queen of flowers, Rose is a heart tonic physically as well as energetically. An often-overlooked remedy, Rose is also an invaluable fertility tonic especially when there are emotional issues or weak sexual desire.

Dose:

In tea- 1 tbsp. per 1 cup infusion, drink 2-3x daily

Essential oil- use 3-5 drops per 1 ounce dilution (water, oil, salts) use as needed

Can also be taken as syrup, cordial, jelly or preserve as needed.

Caution:

Due to the high amount of pesticides and herbicides on roses make sure to buy organic when using for consumption.

Chasteberry (Vitex angus-castus)

A wonderful normalizing herb for the reproductive system, with a long history of use. It has a stimulating effect on the pituitary gland, which among other functions regulates and normalizes hormone production. It is useful for painful and/or irregular menstruation, infertility, PMS, menopausal problems, and other hormonal imbalances. Its been shown to be helpful for endometriosis. Its normalizing action means it is great for restoring the body's natural balance after taking the pill.

Dose:

2-3 droppersful, 2-4 times a day.

Can be used for some acute conditions but works best when taken over a long period. For chronic problems it should be taken for one year or longer. Take for at least six months. Best taken at the beginning of the cycle (before ovulation).

Cautions:

Should not be taken during pregnancy unless under the supervision of a health care practitioner. Can interfere with the effectiveness of birth control pills and other hormone treatment.

Nettle (Urtica dioica)

Nettles are a wonderful nourishing herb and can help fortify and build the blood. It is a wonderful nourishing tonic that can help the body to get ready to support another life. It can help increase infertility, especially when it is caused by poor nutrition, anemia, and atonic uterus.

Dose:

Infusion: 1-3 cups a day. Best in combination with other nourishing herbs. For fertility promotion, it is best to take for several months.

Caution:

Make sure your nettles are early spring nettles. Nettles harvested too late in the season and after flowering can cause kidney pain.

Other

Uterine massage

“warming foods”/aphrodisiacs

Pregnancy

Nutrition

Much of the same nutrition that applies to increasing fertility also applies when you are pregnant. The key is a good and well balanced diet. For women who choose to remain vegetarian during their pregnancy it is important to get enough high quality protein in your diet during this time.

Intuitive eating/cravings

Cravings are common during pregnancy. Often they are your body's way of telling you what it needs at this time. Pregnancy is a wonderful time to begin to tune into your body and learn how to hear its nutritional requests. Intuitively we often know what nutrients are body needs. In today's fast paced, fast food world we have lost our ability to tap into this innate knowledge. The first step to cultivating this intuitive sense is to slow down. Take time before each meal to check in and see what your body wants to eat. And listen to it. Eat without judgment and enjoyment. Listen to those cravings. Take a moment to see what it is your body might want that is causing that craving.

Vitamins

Herbs

Tonics

The best herbs to take during pregnancy are the nourishing tonics, especially those with an affinity to the female reproductive system. These are mild and can be taken daily.

Tonic herbs include:

Raspberry Leaf

Nettles

Oatstraw

Peppermint

Labor Support Herbs

There are many herbs that have traditionally been used to ease and help with labor. These herbs can be powerful female allies. However, they should also be respected. If you are planning to use any of these herbs please do so under the guidance of a health care practitioner. **NOTE:** None of these herbs should be taken before the final six weeks of pregnancy.

Cramp Bark/Black Haw (Viburnum opulus/prunifolium)

Viburnum acts as a uterine sedative and tonic and is true to its name as a smooth muscle anti-spasmodic amazing for relieving uterine pain, contractions, false labor pain and cramping in the back legs and bladder. Its astringency lends help to excessive blood loss. Viburnum is also a uterine tonic for childbirth especially with tendency towards miscarriage.

Dose:

1 cup decoction as needed for acute symptoms

1-2 droppersful tincture as needed

Caution:

Use only under the guidance of a qualified health care practitioner.

Blue and Black Cohosh (Caulophyllum thalictroides/Cimicifuga racemosa)

Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*)

Long used by Native American women, blue cohosh is excellent for heavy achy spasmodic uterine pain. It is a wonderful uterine tonic and can help revitalize the uterine tissues after pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, and coming of the Pill. It has a long history of use for childbirth, easing false labor pains while strengthening and increasing the effectiveness of contractions during actual labor. Has been known to decrease the pain of childbirth and help alleviate postpartum contraction and pain. It is wonderful in combination with other herbs.

Dose:

½ to 1 dropperful, 1-4 times a day.

Cautions:

Do not use during pregnancy, until the last month and then only under the supervision of a health care practitioner.

Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*)

Black Cohosh is another wonderful plant long used by the Native Americans and was introduced to the medical world in 1831. It restores tone to the uterus, especially atonic conditions causing irregular periods, usually caused by surgery, prolapsed uterus, or previous pregnancies and miscarriages. Works well in combination with other herbs.

Dose:

1-2 droppersful, 1-4 times a day.

Cautions:

Do not use during pregnancy, except during the final trimester and only under the supervision of a health care practitioner.

***Severely threatened and near endangerment in the wild. Please use only cultivated plants.

Partridge Berry (Mitchella ripens)

Long used by Native Americans, partridgeberry is a wonderful uterine tonic, strengthening the uterine and pelvic muscles. It also relaxes the uterus and can stop uterine cramping during pregnancy. Essentially helping to maintain the proper balance between relaxation and contraction. It is also a nervous system tonic

and is excellent for anxiety and tension during pregnancy. It is helpful for any conditions associated with a congested and/or atonic uterus, including postpartum hemorrhage and infertility.

Dose:

1 dropperful, 2-3 times a day

Caution:

Do not use until the last six weeks of pregnancy.

Herbs to Avoid During Pregnancy

The following herbs should be avoided or used with caution during pregnancy. This is not a complete list. If in doubt, do not use:

Aloe vera (internal)
Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*)
Arnica montana
Ashwaganda (*Withania somnifera*)
Baptisia tinctura
Cascara sagrada
Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*)
Damiana (*Turnera diffusa*)
Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*)
Feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*)
Ginger (small doses are ok)
Ginkgo biloba
Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*)
Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)
Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*)

Lomatium dissectum
Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*)
Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*)
Myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*)
Oregon Grape root (*Mahonia spp.*)
Osha (*Ligusticum porteri*)
Poke (*Phytolacca decandra*)
Prickly Ash (*Zanthoxylum clava-herculis*)
Rue (*Ruta graveolens*)
Saw Palmetto (*Serenoa repens*)
Senna (*Cassia spp.*)
Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)
Uva Ursi (*Arctostaphylos uva ursi*)
Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)

Glossary of Terms

Adaptogen: assists in the body's ability to cope with stress, whether physical, mental, or emotional. Helps the body to maintain its proper balance.

Alterative: also known as blood and lymph cleansers. Enhances nutrition and repair to bodily tissues.

Amenorrhea: the absence of menstruation for six months or longer during menstrual years.

Analgesic: relieves pain

Anti-catarrhal: decreases the production of mucus from the mucous membranes. *Note: Mucus is necessary and important to the body and the immune system. It should not be stopped unless it is chronically in excess and the cause cannot be addressed. For colds and flu, it is better to thin the mucus than to stop it.*

Astringent: causes the contraction of tissues. Drying action.

Carminative: reduces and prevents gas

Cholagogue: stimulates bile flow from the gall bladder.

Diaphoretic: induces perspiration.

Diuretic: stimulates urination.

Dysmenorrhea: painful menstruation

Emetic: causes vomiting. *Anti-emetic* – stops nausea and vomiting

Emmenagogue: stimulates menstruation

Expectorant: causes the expulsion of mucus from the lungs. Two types: soothing and mucilaginous, and stimulating. Stimulating expectorants should always be taken with lots of water.

Hypotensive: lowers blood pressure

Hypoglycemic: lowers blood sugar

Immunomodulator: enhances the body's immune system.

Menorrhagia: excessively heavy bleeding during menstruation

Oligomenorrhea: scanty or infrequent menstruation

Rubefacient: increases circulation to the skin, usually localized.

Vulnerary: promotes healing of wounds or irritated tissues.

Recommended Reading

Berger, Judith (1998) *Herbal Rituals*, St. Martin's Griffin Press, New York.

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McIntyre, Anne (1994) *The Complete Woman's Herbal*, Henry Holt Company, New York

Northrup, Christiane (1994) *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*, Bantam Books, New York

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Soule, Deb (1995) *The Roots of Healing: A Woman's Book of Herbs*, Citadel Press, New York.

Trickey, Ruth (1998) *Women, Hormones, and the Menstrual Cycle*, Allen and Unwin Press, Australia