

## Shorts



www.thefamilycaregiver.org/our\_state\_volunter\_network\_ccan) teach caregivers how to relieve their burdens. These sites also recommend other resources such as Area Agency on Aging (www.aoa.gov) and the Eldercare Locator (800-677-1116 or www.eldercare.gov). In addition, caregivers who work at companies with 50 or more employees may be eligible for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to care for relatives under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act.

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### Chaste Tree Fruit Helpful for PMS

*Vitex agnus-castus* L., otherwise known as chaste tree or monk's pepper, has a long history in Western herbal medicine. Hippocrates reported its effect on female reproduction and fertility. In the Middle Ages, monks used it to decrease their sexual desire (hence the common names). In recent years, research has shown that the shrub's small fruit is an effective treatment for premenstrual syndrome and infertility. The German Commission E approved chaste tree for menstrual cycle irregularity, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and mastodynia (breast pain). (The German Commission E is a committee set up by the German government in 1978, consisting of scientists, toxicologists, pharmacists, and doctors, to review safety and efficacy of herbs sold in that country.) Human and animal research shows that constituents in the herb bind to "dopamine<sub>2</sub> receptors in the anterior pituitary and decrease both basal- and thyrotropin-releasing-hormone-stimulated secretion of prolactin. This decrease in prolactin leads to increased progesterone production in the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle, which reduces symptoms of PMS," explains Mary L. Hardy, MD.

German researchers have performed several studies on *Vitex* and PMS. In a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study, 170 women with PMS (mean age 36 years) were followed over three menstrual cycles. Eighty-six of the women received one 20 mg dry chaste tree extract tablet each day, and the other 84 took a matching placebo. In the extract group, 52% of the women had at least 50% reduction of PMS symptoms at the end of three cycles. Four in this group reported mild adverse events (details unreported). In comparison, 24% of the placebo group reported a 50% or more reduction of PMS symptoms with three mild adverse reactions. Another German study, involving 1634 women,

evaluated the effectiveness of a German *Vitex* product called Femicur (Loch E-G, Selle H, Boblitz N. *Journal of Women's Health & Gender-Based Medicine* 2000; 9[3]:315-320). At the end of three menstrual cycles, 42% of the participants told doctors that PMS symptoms had disappeared. Another 51% reported that symptoms had decreased; 6% found no change; and 1% experienced an increase in symptoms. No serious adverse events were reported. About 6% of the women experienced reactions that included mild skin reactions and gastrointestinal upset.

A systematic review of chaste tree's adverse events, carried out by Daniele and colleagues at University of Rome La Sapienza (Italy), confirms that side effects tend to be mild and reversible. Common reactions include nausea, headache, gastrointestinal disturbances, menstrual disorders, acne, itching, and rashes. Although no negative drug interactions have been reported, the Italian researchers warn that *Vitex* may theoretically interfere with dopaminergic antagonists. Also, women who are pregnant or breast-feeding should not use this herb.

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### Estrogen Dominance, Premenopause, and PMS

Estrogen dominance accounts for many health complaints in women during their 30s and 40s as ovulation and progesterone secretion become inconsistent in the years before menopause. Estrogen dominance occurs when estrogen levels remain normal or high while progesterone secretion declines. Symptoms of estrogen dominance include breast swelling and tenderness, abdominal cramping, backaches, bloating, headaches/migraines, irritability, anxiety, depression, food cravings, brain fog, sleep difficulties, and/or lowered sex drive. These symptoms characterize premenstrual syndrome (PMS), which is linked to estrogen dominance.

In her book *Dr. Susan Lark's Hormone Revolution*, Lark advocates a Mediterranean-type diet, exercise, and supplement program to address estrogen dominance. The program is designed to decrease estrogen production, increase the hormone's breakdown and elimination, and increase progesterone levels. Lark advocates using weakly estrogenic herbs, such as soy, to decrease estrogen production. Soy isoflavones in tofu, tempeh, soy milk, and edamame prevent the conversion of testosterone and androstenedione into estrogen by hooking onto relevant enzymes and rendering them ineffective. Flaxseed oil and flaxseed meal also inhibit estrogen production and promote ovulation (encouraging progesterone production).

Encouraging the breakdown and elimination of estrogen is another way to decrease estrogen dominance. Normally, the liver metabolizes estrogen into inactive compounds that are then secreted with bile into the small intestine and eliminated in bowel movements. Several nutrients support this process, according to Lark. Calcium d-glucarate supports liver detoxification of excess estrogen. Diindolylmethane, a compound found in *Brassica* vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, bok choy, cabbage, and brussels sprouts), encourages the breakdown of estrogen into "good" metabolites. The liver also needs B vitamins, particularly B6, to detoxify excess estrogen. Lark refers to research by Guy Abraham, MD, in which PMS symptoms (menstrual cramps, pain, weight gain) decreased in women who took 500 mg of B6 daily for three months. "According to Dr. Abraham," says Lark, "vitamin B6 helped to change the blood levels of both estrogen and progesterone and bring them into balance."

Increasing progesterone levels is the other part of the solution to estrogen dominance. Chaste tree berry (*Vitex*) increases progesterone levels and ovulation, and restores menstruation. Lark says that this herb tends to work slowly and may take three or four months to show its full effect. She also suggests encouraging progesterone production by supporting the nervous system and organs with glandulars from a company like Standard Process. Biochemically identical natural progesterone is another option.

"Clearly, estrogen dominance is a complex condition," says Lark. "And it's one I know first-hand. When I was in my 20's, I too suffered from estrogen dominance. By following the program I've outlined. ... I can happily report that my hormone levels have been balanced for several decades now."

Lark, SM, Day K. *Dr. Susan Lark's Hormone Revolution*. Portola Press, LLC;2008:59-94.

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