

Happy hormones

When it comes to balancing hormonal health, these five herbs are gentle yet powerful allies, writes naturopath Toni Green.

Toni's Supreme Women's Tonic

Fill a one-litre glass jar one-third full of vitex berries (fresh or dried). Fill the jar to the top with 100-proof vodka, cap tightly, and leave the mixture to sit for six weeks. Strain off berries, squeezing as much liquid out of them as possible. Pour into amber glass bottles and store in a cool, dark place. Dosage: Take 1 teaspoon in 20ml of water twice daily.

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Potency wood (Muirá puama)

According to a study in *Advanced Therapeutics*, 65 percent of women taking this herb reported increased libido, and better sexual satisfaction and orgasm intensity. A natural adaptogen, it has long been used in traditional Brazilian medicine for reducing stress, countering fatigue and enhancing cognitive and physical performance.

Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera)

This targets the endocrine system, encouraging hormonal balance. In a study of menopausal women, ashwagandha significantly decreased anxiety, hot flushes, and mood swings. Much evidence also supports its ability to support thyroid function and control the stress hormone cortisol, so - since stress has such a dramatic effect on ageing, contributing to muscle weakness, cognitive impairment and wrinkles - it can be said to promote graceful ageing.

Horsetail (Equisetum arvense)

By far the richest plant source of silica which, along with calcium, is necessary for healthy hair and nails, and strong bones. A University of Maryland study has shown that women with

osteoporosis who took horsetail extract for 12 months experienced improved bone density. Horsetail helps the body absorb calcium better, which enhances bone flexibility as well.

Cramp bark (Viburnum opulus)

As the name suggests, this is an important antispasmodic herb, and is well known for reducing period cramps and post-partum pain; it also has a long traditional use for preventing threatened miscarriage by halting uterine contractions in the early stages of pregnancy. Cramp bark relaxes smooth muscle - i.e. muscles we have no control over, such as airways and intestines - and striated muscle, such as those attached to limbs, so it's great for leg cramps.

Vitex (Vitex agnus castus)

This herb nourishes and supports the entire female endocrine system and ensures the correct balance of progesterone and oestrogen, making it the herb of choice for treating many problems associated with the menstrual cycle, including premenstrual syndrome, fluid retention, depression, acne, breast tenderness, irritability, and menstrual flooding; it also helps normalise scanty or irregular periods, shortens the time it takes for a woman's body to regain its natural rhythm when she is coming off the Pill, and enhances ovulation, so increasing the odds of conception, as well as helping the new mother to produce breast milk. Vitex also helps ease menopausal symptoms of depression, hot flushes, irregular cycles, along with fibroids, breast disease, and endometriosis. 

