

# **PMS: You don't have to take it!**

By Frank Gemmato, LAc

An array of exciting treatments is now available for women who may be suffering from premenstrual syndrome (PMS). For an estimated 30-40% of menstruating women, PMS is a monthly nightmare. The symptoms include:

- craving foods especially chocolate or sugar
- abnormal mood swings and irritability
- bloating
- breast tenderness
- back pain
- constipation and diarrhea

These symptoms result from a disturbance of hormone levels of estrogen, which are elevated, and progesterone levels which are reduced. This leads to impaired liver function, reduced serotonin and endorphin levels, impaired vitamin B6 activity, and alterations in other hormone levels.

## **Classifications of PMS**

According to Dr. Michael Murray, several experts have created a classification system to sort PMS sufferers into sub-groups. This classification can suggest specific treatment approaches for specific individuals. Generally, they are PMS-A (anxiety), PMS-C (carbohydrate craving), PMS-D (depression), and PMS-H (bloating and discomfort). If you would like a free copy of our PMS Questionnaire, please call 771-6826, and we will mail or fax you one.

## **Nutritional Strategies**

The primary nutritional strategies for dealing with PMS are to increase consumption of plant-based foods (vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts and seeds) while dramatically decreasing animal products. A study of vegetarian women found that estrogen levels were dramatically lower than in their carnivorous counterparts. Also, increase consumption of soy foods (tofu, tempeh, soy milk, etc.) These foods are rich in phytoestrogens, which have a balancing effect on estrogen. Eliminate caffeine, especially if anxiety, depression, or breast tenderness are present. There is significant evidence that caffeine, sugar and excessive salt aggravate PMS symptoms.

## **Thyroid, depression, stress, and exercise**

Low thyroid function (hypothyroid) affects a large percentage of women who have PMS. A lowered basal body temperature (below 97.8 degrees Fahrenheit) suggests hypothyroidism, and must be treated by your health care provider. Sometimes depression is the underlying cause of apparent PMS symptoms. (A Depression Self-Test is available through my office.)

Extreme, unusual, or long-lasting stress also plays a role in PMS, triggering biological changes in brain chemistry, altering adrenal function and

endorphin secretion. The management of thyroid and stress are therefore crucial in the effective treatment of PMS.

Women who exercise regularly do not suffer nearly as often from PMS as those who do not. Regular aerobic exercise seems to prevent against the deterioration of the mood before and during menstruation.

### **Supplements for PMS**

It may be necessary to take supplemental *probiotics*, in order to establish proper intestinal flora. These are friendly bacteria that populate the intestines, enabling the correct breakdown of toxins and estrogens as they are eliminated from the body. The most common probiotic supplements are *L. acidophilus* and *B. bifidum*.

Vitamin B6 (pyroxidine) and magnesium are the two most important supplements for PMS. These interact extensively as they work together in many enzyme systems. It is thought that B6 may work by increasing the accumulation of magnesium within the cells of the body. Most PMS sufferers have a reduced level of red blood cell (RBC) magnesium. Symptoms of this deficiency in PMS cases include: emotional instability, nervous sensitivity, with generalized aches and pains. The correct dosage of B6 and magnesium is determined very carefully from body weight. B6 is one of the few water soluble vitamins with the potential for toxicity. While caution must be exercised, B6 and magnesium therapy offers great hope for many suffering from PMS.

Other supplements (calcium, zinc, vitamin E, and essential fatty acids) are considered important in PMS management and may be used on an individual basis. These considerations can often be addressed by taking a high-quality multi-vitamin and mineral formulation.

### **Herbs and Acupuncture**

In terms of traditional Chinese medicine, PMS is usually the result of stagnation of the *qi*, or vital energy of the body. This imbalance is usually correlated to the function of the liver, which is responsible for the smooth flow of the body's energy. A variety of herbal and acupuncture treatments are available to correct these imbalances. Angelica, licorice root, and bupleurum are some of the herbs documented to alleviate the tension, bloating and pain associated with PMS. The western herbs black cohosh and chasteberry may help if uterine fibroids or breast pain and tenderness are present.

### **Alternatives for all women**

Positive dietary, nutritional, and lifestyle choices in dealing with PMS offer women alternatives to drugs and negative coping patterns. Natural approaches to the treatment of a wide variety of gynecological problems are gaining increasing popularity in American society. Here begins a series on the treatment of diseases related to menstruation using acupuncture, herbs and nutrition. Next month we will consider natural therapies for menopausal symptoms

*Frank Gemmato, LAc is a licensed acupuncturist practicing in Milwaukie, Oregon  
503-659-8900.*