

Vitex *agnus-castus*

Chaste tree, Chasteberry,
Monk's pepper



Part Used

The ripe, dried fruit

Common/Potential Uses

- Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)
- Breast tenderness/pain associated with the menstrual cycle
- Amenorrhea (lack of menses)
- Infertility

How It Works

Vitex stimulates the pituitary gland to produce more luteinizing hormone, which leads to greater production of progesterone during the second half (luteal phase) of a woman's cycle. Vitex also reduces high levels of prolactin in the second half of the menstrual cycle.

Recommended Use

Dried or liquid preparations delivering 30 to 40 milligrams of the crushed fruit daily. Use vitex over a period of several months continuously. Once improvement occurs, continue treatment for an additional 4 to 6 weeks.

Side Effects

Side effects are rare using vitex. Minor gastrointestinal upset and a mild skin rash with itching have been reported in less than 2 percent of the women monitored while taking vitex.

Safety Issues/Drug Interactions

Vitex is not recommended for use during pregnancy. It should not be taken together with hormone therapy.

NATURAL therapies have made a dramatic contribution to women's health care. Growing numbers of women are opting for safe and effective natural medicines to manage gynecological conditions for which drugs offer short-term relief but threaten long-term health. This is particularly true for women with menstrual abnormalities stemming from hormonal imbalances. Nutritional and herbal interventions such as vitamin B₆, magnesium, vitamin E, black cohosh, dong quai, and evening primrose oil offer relief for women with menstrual cycle abnormalities such as premenstrual syndrome.

The unique ability of vitex to correct female hormonal imbalances in a gentle manner makes it effective against premenstrual syndrome, amenorrhea (lack of a period), and even infertility.

PLANT FACTS

Vitex agnus-castus, also known as chaste tree, is a shrub with finger-shaped leaves and slender violet flowers. The plant grows in creek beds and on river banks in valleys and lower foothills in the Mediterranean and central Asia. The plant blooms in high summer. After pollination, it develops dark brown to black fruit the size of a peppercorn. The fruit possesses a pepperlike aroma and flavor. The ripe, dried fruit of *Vitex agnus-castus* is the part of the plant used in medicinal preparations today.

HISTORY

Vitex belongs to the official plants of antiquity (although I'm not sure whether it was ever featured on *American Bandstand*). Hippocrates, Dioscorides, and Theophrast mention the use of the plant in their writings. In the fourth century B.C., Hippocrates wrote that vitex was effective for a wide variety of conditions, including hemorrhaging following childbirth, and also assisted with the "passing of afterbirth." Decoctions of the fruit and plant were also used in sitz baths for diseases of the uterus.

Vitex was also believed to inspire chastity. This is the source of one of its common names—"chaste tree." This name partially developed from the ancient Greeks, who used it in festivals honoring the goddess Demeter. During the festival, young women were expected to refrain from sexual activity and were adorned with blossoms of vitex to demonstrate their chastity.

The Christian church in Europe later developed a variation on this theme by placing the blossoms along the path leading to the monastery at the initiation of novice monks. The vitex blossoms supposedly suppressed libido and served as a deterrent to the temptation to run off to town and lose one's monkhood! Monks were also responsible for another common name for vitex—"monk's pepper." This name is derived from the fact that the fruits, which taste and smell like pepper, were commonly used as seasoning by the chef in residence at the monastery.¹

MODERN DEVELOPMENT

Modern medical work with vitex began with the introduction of a concentrated extract of the dried vitex fruit in the 1950s. Produced by Madaus of Cologne, Germany, the extract (Agnolyt®) was concentrated so that 100 milliliters of the solution contained 9 grams of the fruit. This is the form that has been employed in modern clinical research. Another European vitex-based product (Mastodynon®) has also been the focus of many studies—particularly in the area of prolactin inhibition and the treatment of breast pain associated with a woman’s menstrual cycle.

The German Commission E monograph (see Part 2 for an explanation of the German monograph system) lists the whole extract as “medicinally active.”² This term implies a cooperative effort among the different components of the fruit. Contrast this with an herbal extract such as milk thistle, which has very specific active compounds.

A BRIEF PRIMER ON LUTEAL PHASE DEFECT

If you are a woman with menstrual cycle irregularities or imbalances, there’s a good chance you’re not producing enough progesterone during the second phase of your cycle (also known as the *luteal phase*). This means that estrogen, the dominant female hormone during the first phase of the cycle (*follicular phase*), continues to dominate the second half. The result leads to a shortening (by as much as 50 percent) of the luteal phase, or “luteal phase defect.”

The net effect of luteal phase defect and low progesterone production is a host of menstrual cycle abnormalities. These include heavy periods (hypermenorrhea), abnormally frequent periods (polymenorrhea), and also lack of menstruation (amenorrhea). Luteal phase defect may also contribute to premenstrual syndrome.³

Another problem frequently found with luteal phase defect is overproduction of the pituitary hormone prolactin. Prolactin, which assists with lactation in nursing mothers, has been shown to be abnormally elevated in 70 percent of women with luteal phase defect.⁴ High levels of prolactin in

the latter part of a woman's cycle can lead to breast tenderness and pain. More important, high levels are associated with infertility in some instances.

HOW VITEX WORKS

Vitex does not contain hormones. Its benefits stem from its actions on the pituitary gland.⁵ Vitex increases the pituitary's production of the regulating hormone luteinizing hormone (LH).⁶ LH boosts the secretion of progesterone during the luteal phase. The resulting increase in progesterone production leads to a normal balance between estrogen and progesterone and a normal two-phase cycle.

Vitex also keeps prolactin secretion in check.⁷ This effect appears to be modulated by the ability of vitex to bind to dopamine receptors and thus inhibit prolactin release.⁸ This action is an important focal point of the success of vitex in the treatment of breast pain and swelling associated with the menstrual cycle, and often a component of PMS.

HEALTH CARE APPLICATIONS

PREMENSTRUAL SYNDROME AND CYCLICAL BREAST PAIN

Following more than 1,500 women for an average of 166 days, a survey of gynecology practices in Germany⁹ found vitex to be a valuable treatment for premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Women were placed on a daily dose of 40 drops of a vitex liquid extract (Agnolyt), taken once in the morning with some water. The success of treatment with vitex was determined through questionnaires given to both gynecologists and their patients.

Physicians rated the treatment as very good or good 92 percent of the time. Fifty-seven percent of the patients reported improvement, while another 33 percent had complete symptom relief. Mild side effects (mild upset stomach and short-term skin rash with itching) were reported in only 2 percent of the women. These results have been verified in another study with PMS sufferers.¹⁰

Another study with women suffering from PMS found that vitex matched up very well with the ol' standby vitamin B₆ in the reduction of

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symptoms.¹¹ One hundred seventy-five women were given either vitex (approximately 30 to 40 milligrams per day in capsule form) or 200 milligrams of vitamin B₆ for three consecutive menstrual cycles. At the end of the study, women in both groups and their doctors reported success. However, the vitex group reported a greater decrease in overall symptoms and specifically breast tenderness, bloating, and depression. Thirty-six percent of the women taking vitex reported being symptom-free at the end of three cycles, compared to 21 percent of women taking vitamin B₆.

Another benefit for women taking vitex for PMS has been reduced cyclical breast pain, a result of elevated prolactin and possibly progesterone levels.¹² A liquid product known as Mastodynon® (Bionorica, Neumarkt, Germany) combines 32.4 milligrams of vitex with assorted homeopathic ingredients. The product (not yet available in the United States) has been widely researched for cyclical breast pain¹³ and is approved in Germany and other countries specifically for that indication. Expect the same three or four cycles for vitex to work for this condition as well. It may be interesting for women with cyclical breast pain to use vitex and evening primrose oil together.

SECONDARY AMENORRHEA AND INFERTILITY

Research and clinical experience have also pointed to vitex as useful in a host of other menstrual cycle imbalances and irregularities. These include amenorrhea (no menstrual cycle at all) and some cases of infertility. In one study, ten of fifteen women with secondary amenorrhea began having a normal period after 6 months of treatment with vitex.¹⁴ Hormone measures indicated a rise in progesterone and LH levels.

Vitex has also shown some promise in the treatment of infertility—particularly those cases with established luteal phase defect and high prolactin levels. Forty-eight women diagnosed with infertility, 23 to 39 years of age, were given vitex once daily for 3 months.¹⁵ Forty-five women completed the study.

Seven women became pregnant during the study. In twenty-five women, progesterone levels were restored to normal—a factor that bodes well for potential pregnancy. Seven women had a rise in serum progesterone that did not reach normal levels during the 3 months of treatment.

However, the upward trend in their progesterone levels probably means they'd achieve normal levels in another two to three cycles.

A double-blind, placebo-controlled study with eighty-nine women with infertility, luteal phase defect, or secondary amenorrhea looked at the effect off Mastodynon® on progesterone, LH, prolactin, and conception rates over a 3-month span.¹⁶ Of the sixty-six women evaluated at the end of the study, thirty-one had normal hormone values. More important, fifteen women (seven with amenorrhea, four with infertility, and seven with luteal phase defect) conceived during the 3-month study.

HIGH PROLACTIN LEVELS

As mentioned previously, vitex exerts a modulating effect on prolactin levels in the body. One study found that vitex was able to lower levels after 3 months of use.¹⁷ It is interesting that the fifty-two women in this study also had luteal phase defect. A lengthening of the luteal phase and increased progesterone were also noted. No side effects were noted, and two women actually became pregnant during the study. Please remember that vitex is not a substitute for drugs such as bromocriptine that are used in severe cases of hyperprolactinemia, which are often secondary to a pituitary tumor.

HOW TO USE VITEX

With its emphasis on long-term balancing of a woman's hormonal system, vitex is not a fast-acting medication. If you have PMS or frequent or heavy periods, use vitex continuously for 4 to 6 months. Women with amenorrhea and infertility should remain on vitex for at least 12 to 18 months unless pregnancy occurs during treatment. Vitex should not be used once a woman becomes pregnant. Use of vitex with hormone therapy is not recommended. Because of its actions on dopamine receptors, vitex is probably best avoided during lactation.

The best news for women taking vitex is the one-a-day dosage. The recommended daily dose is an encapsulated or liquid product delivering 30 to 40 milligrams of the dried fruit daily.¹⁸ Take this dose first thing in the morning with some liquid. Some women may experience increased

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menstrual flow for the first couple of periods while using vitex. This effect will usually stop by the third or fourth cycle.

While there are no known drug interactions with vitex, it is probably best to avoid using it with drugs that block dopamine receptors, including haloperidol.

Product update: Agnolyt (Madaus AG, Cologne, Germany) is available from Nature's Way under the trade name Femaprin™.

RELATED CONDITIONS DISCUSSED IN PART 6

- Acne
- Fibrocystic breast disease/cyclical breast pain
- Infertility
- Premenstrual syndrome