

*The*  
Intimate  
Herbal

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE  
*to Herbal Medicine for*  
Sexual Health, Pleasure,  
*and* Hormonal Balance

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**Lady's mantle** oil eases lumps, swelling, and pain. Massaged over the breasts, it tones breast tissue.

**Violet** oil is healing to fibrocystic breasts, breast cancer, mastitis, and cysts.<sup>19</sup> It is a deeply soothing breast oil.

**Cleavers** oil decongests lymphatic tissue and enhances the flow of lymph. It possesses anti-breast cancer activity.<sup>20</sup>

**Calendula** oil is a healing lymphatic tonic. It acts as an alternative anti-inflammatory.

## Contraception

The issue of contraception concerns people of reproductive age who wish to control when and how they conceive, along with those who wish to avoid conception and baby-making altogether. The goal of contraception is to prevent pregnancy while still enjoying penetrative sex, vaginal stimulation, orgasms, ejaculation, and the safe exchange of fluids.

Contraception as a whole is essential to women's health and the health of society, as is the ability to choose when or if to conceive. Whether that choice is based on personal reasons or based on medical circumstances that preclude the possibility of a healthy pregnancy, such as during illness, infection, or postpartum, contraception is what makes sexual and reproductive wellness possible. Contraception should be pain-free, safe, accessible, and tailored to each person's preferences and lifestyle.

The main methods of contraception today include barrier methods such as condoms, which not only prevent unwanted pregnancy but also protect against STIs. Hormonal birth control, and specifically the contraceptive pill, is by far the most commonly used contraceptive method, though it doesn't protect against STIs. Hormonal contraception may be prescribed for other reasons beside reproductive freedom: acne, migraines, and irregular cycles may lead health practitioners to hand out the pill.

Unfortunately, using the pill to "regulate" the menstrual cycle and hormonal cycle may result in a masking of symptoms that tend to return with

a vengeance when hormonal contraception is discontinued—whether that is one year later or ten years later. In the past, medicinal herbs were used as contraceptive agents in the form of roots and seeds brewed as tea. These days, there are many different contraceptive methods to choose from. All contraceptive methods have pros and cons, benefits, risks, and potential side effects. The following section offers herbal recommendations for users of hormonal birth control, information on herbal contraceptives, and for when contraception fails, herbal support for pregnancy termination.

### *Hormonal Birth Control*

Hormonal birth control is the most widely used form of contraception in the West today, and in the form of the contraceptive pill, it is convenient and easy to use. However, it is known to increase the risk of breast, cervical, and liver cancers. Other health risks associated with the pill include blood clot formation, stroke, heart disease, depression, weight gain, metabolic syndrome, and hormonal imbalance. Another unfortunate side effect of the pill, ironically, is a lower libido. This has led some health practitioners to quip: “The pill: it works; you won’t risk getting pregnant because you’ll never want to have sex again!”

What happens in the body as a result of prolonged exposure to hormonal birth control is a suppression of the menstrual cycle, which consists of ovulation, menstruation, and the hormonal flow that governs menses. Long-term use of hormonal contraceptives affects endocrine function, burdens the liver and other elimination pathways, and alters the flora populating the gut microbiome.

People with menstrual cycles who are sexually active and who wish to rely on hormonal contraception will find great support and relief from herbs to assist with renewed wellness and sexual and reproductive freedom. You can pair herbs with your current contraception method to relieve some of the associated health risks. Choice herbs for this purpose include lymphatics, nervines, cardiotonics, liver tonics, adaptogens, and nutritives.

Lymphatic herbs support hormonal balance by optimizing the function of elimination pathways. Optimal function of elimination pathways is essential for the clearance of excess hormones that may accumulate as a

result of hormonal birth control use. The lymphatic system is no less essential than the blood circulatory system for human health and well-being and the cleansing of toxins from the body. Take the lymphatic tonic herbs calendula or cleavers or both daily, preferably in the form of infusions or herbal baths.

Nervine herbs support a healthy mood and nervous system. The use of hormonal birth control is associated with possible mood disorders, depression,<sup>21</sup> anxiety, and cancer of the central nervous system. Nervines replenish the nervous system and relax physical as well as mental and emotional strain. Herbal nervines include milky oats, valerian root, and passionflower. As a trophorestorative nervine, milky oats heal the myelin sheath and rebuild nerve tissue. They are often taken in the form of herbal tinctures.

Note that the popular antidepressant and nervine herb St. John's wort may interfere with birth control.<sup>22</sup> St. John's wort is an herbal cytochrome P450 inducer and is associated with increased metabolism of norethindrone and ethinyl estradiol, breakthrough bleeding, follicle growth, and ovulation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it may interfere with contraceptive effectiveness and make it less effective.

Cardiotonic herbs keep the heart healthy. Hormonal birth control, and especially the pill, is linked with increased risk of heart disease, blood clots, and stroke. Cardiotonic herbs and heart tonics provide essential nourishment for cardiovascular health. Milky oats, hawthorn, and *Ginkgo biloba* are superior remedies to mitigate risk and support heart health and circulation. Flavonoids in *Ginkgo biloba* reduce capillary permeability and fragility, while also serving as free-radical scavengers.<sup>24</sup> Terpenes (in this case, ginkgolides) inhibit platelet-activating factor, lower vascular resistance, and enhance circulatory flow. *Ginkgo biloba* can be taken in capsule form.

Liver tonic herbs support liver health and detoxification. Hormonal contraception may tax the liver and overburden detoxification pathways.<sup>25</sup> A healthy liver and optimal hepatic function are necessary for the effective elimination of synthetic hormones from the body. Medicinal herbs for liver health include milk thistle, dandelion root, and turmeric. Enjoy these in tinctures or capsules. Turmeric can be made into delicious golden milk, a

warm plant-based drink that's heartwarming and liver-healing at the same time.

Adaptogen herbs are superior endocrine regulators and hormonal balancers. They make ideal herbal allies for those who use hormonal birth control over long periods. Adaptogenic herbs and mushrooms such as holy basil (tulsi), reishi mushroom, and ashwagandha root regulate the HPA axis along with the ovary-adrenal-thyroid (OAT) axis. Enjoy holy basil in the form of daily infusions paired with nutritive and nervine herbs. Reishi and ashwagandha can be enjoyed in powder form, added to elixirs and smoothies.

Nutritive herbs deeply nourish your whole body and restore vitality and strength. The pill depletes specific vitamins and nutrients. Vitamin C, vitamin D, B vitamins, selenium, magnesium, and zinc are among the main nutrients that should be replenished with the help of medicinal herbs and nutritive tonics like nettle, oat straw, alfalfa, and dandelion leaf. Herbal tea brewed with nutritive herbs supplies the body with a wealth of highly bio-available nutrients and helps reverse vitamin and mineral deficiency.

### *Herbal Post-Pill Cleansing*

For those who are ready to forgo hormonal birth control, whether it is for medical or personal reasons, because their relationship ended, they want to practice celibacy, desire to try other contraceptive methods such as cycle charting and natural family planning, or are looking to have a baby, a period of post-pill cleansing is essential for bouncing back to optimal sexual and reproductive health.

Intentional post-pill cleansing nourishes and supports the body in finding its way back to hormonal balance and regular cycles. This is especially important for those who want to make a baby right away. A period of three to six months (and in some cases up to twelve months) of post-pill cleansing before conceiving can make a world of difference in the ease of conception and the experience of a healthy pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. But no matter whether or not baby-making is in the plans, post-pill cleansing with medicinal herbs brings the body back to balance by cleansing and restoring hormonal and sexual wellness.

**Liver tonics** support detoxification and clear out excess hormones.

Liver tonic herbs include turmeric, milk thistle, and schisandra.

**Nutritive tonics** fill nutritional gaps and provide essential nutrients depleted by the pill. Nutritive tonic herbs include nettle, oat straw, red clover, and red raspberry leaf.

**Uterine tonics** tone the reproductive organs and nourish the uterus.

Uterine tonic herbs include red raspberry leaf, lady's mantle, motherwort, and cramp bark.

**Hormone balancers** support a healthy hormonal cycle for menstrual wellness and fertility. Hormone balancing herbs include maca, vitex, milk thistle, and schisandra.

For a full protocol, follow all the recommendations included in the previous section, "Hormonal Birth Control," for current users of hormonal contraceptives.

### *Herbal Contraception*

As more and more people become wary of using hormonal birth control, interest in herbal contraception is booming. Many women feel that they weren't appropriately warned by their doctors about the possible dangers and risks associated with hormonal contraceptives, and they are now looking for alternatives in the herb world. Along with a lack of trust in pharmaceuticals, there's also a lack of access to safe and welcoming sexual and reproductive health care for many women and people with female reproductive organs. All of this makes herbs and herbal contraception look like the haven at the end of the road. But are herbal contraceptives effective, and are they safe? It depends on whom you ask. I've dabbled in herbal contraception for a few years. Today, after ten years of herbal practice, my approach as a practitioner is to discourage the use of herbs as an ongoing contraceptive method.

Medicinal herbs make wonderful allies for sexual and reproductive wellness. They support optimal fertility and balanced hormones and cycles. But they're not the best option as a regular and ongoing method of

contraception, for a few reasons. Using plants regularly to prevent conception means using plants to interrupt ovulation, to alter naturally occurring progesterone following ovulation (and to prevent implantation of a fertilized egg), or to otherwise disrupt important and finely tuned processes guided by the natural wisdom of the body. Even though there have been few, if any, modern reports of serious harm from responsible and educated herbal contraception, I'm not an advocate of using herbs to disrupt important and complex bodily processes. When my clients come to me asking for herbal contraception advice, I steer them toward cycle charting and body literacy instead.

Standard sex education has people believe that women are fertile all the time. The contraceptive pill, which is taken daily, reinforces this false notion. As a result, my clients think that in order to be effective, herbal contraception has to be taken daily as well. But women are only fertile for a handful of days each month. In order to be safe and effective, herbal contraception should be used only occasionally during this short fertile window.

In a cycle-aware, body-literate dreamland sex world of empowered fertility and conscious contraception, here is what would happen. Unprotected intercourse with penetration and ejaculation would take place during the infertile window (which usually means the luteal phase, during menstruation, and the beginning of the follicular phase—but every woman is different, so cycle-chart to be sure). During the fertile window (ovulation day plus the five to seven days prior), you would abstain from the type of sex that involves ejaculation inside the vagina or enjoy other yummy pleasures instead. Dildos, fingers, tongue—you name it, there's lots of options. If you really want penetrative sex during your fertile window, you would then use a nonhormonal barrier method like condoms.

What I recommend is only to use herbs as contraception in emergency cases, or as a backup when you slip from your responsible plan, or when the condom breaks. For folks with no access to pharmaceutical emergency birth control options like the morning-after pill, contraceptive herbs are useful to have on hand as an alternative. The approach I take with my clients is simple. Once they've become acquainted with and informed about their cycles and fertility, I may recommend small amounts of one herb to

prevent implantation for emergency purposes: Queen Anne's lace. But with a few caveats.

Though little is known about herbal contraception today, medicinal herbs have been used for contraception and family planning for thousands of years. A huge loss of herbal knowledge occurred in the Middle Ages as a result of the witch hunts. Information regarding birth control was orally transmitted from woman to woman, and as a consequence of the persecution of "witches," who many believe were often female midwives, herbalists, and healers, much of this information was lost. But herbs continue to live on. Over 130 herbs have been identified by modern research as having antifertility properties. Medicinal plants affect fertility in distinct ways. Herbs may alter ovarian function, uterine function, and hormone production. They may inhibit hormonal action, implantation, and sperm production. Some herbs prevent fertilization by generating a protective layer around an egg. Antifertility plants prevent fertilization, antioviulatory plants inhibit ovulation, anti-implantation plants block implantation, and abortifacient plants cause abortion.

Queen Anne's lace, also called wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), is probably the best-known and most popular herb today when it comes to herbal contraception. I know many herb gals and friends who have relied on this herb for some years and with satisfaction. However, many folks have faced unwanted or unplanned pregnancies as a result of wild carrot use. There are a few kids in my social circle that we lovingly call "wild carrot babies." Wild carrot will have different outcomes based on when in the ovarian cycle it is consumed.

Queen Anne's lace is a biennial herb in the Apiaceae family. It has been known as a contraceptive herb with abortifacient and antifertility properties throughout history, and it is believed that wild carrot has been used in this way for over two thousand years. Modern North American herbalists suggest that oral administration of the seeds causes the endometrium to become inhospitable for a fertilized embryo to implant. The recommended protocol for using wild carrot seeds as contraception is to chew one teaspoon of seeds once a day during the ovulation period, or immediately after unprotected sex involving vaginal penetration and ejaculation during the fertile period of the menstrual cycle.

The fertility-enhancing properties of wild carrot are lesser known but potent, and like its antifertility properties, have to do with the phases of the menstrual cycle. Some women observe increased cervical secretions and vaginal lubrication when using wild carrot in the follicular phase leading up to ovulation. Wild carrot supports healthy estrogen levels in this phase of the cycle, which enhances wetness and libido and provides a receptive space for sperm and for conception to occur. Wild carrot also has gentle cleansing and detoxing properties that enhance health and fertility.

During the second phase of the menstrual cycle, known as the luteal phase, wild carrot seeds renew and refresh the womb by encouraging the shedding of old stagnant blood. In doing so, wild carrot may help promote conception and act as a fertility enhancer by preparing a fertile ground for a healthy embryo to be implanted during the following fertile period. But during or right after ovulation, wild carrot seeds can prevent eggs from implanting by encouraging the shedding of the uterine lining. In other words, wild carrot is pro-fertility during the follicular and luteal phases of the menstrual cycle. But during ovulation, it prevents implantation.

In this way, wild carrot may be used as both a pro-fertility and an anti-fertility agent. For enhancing fertility and the chances of conception, take the tinctured seed extract (15–30 drops) or chew 1 teaspoon of the seeds before ovulation. To prevent conception, take the same preparation during or right after ovulation and following unprotected intercourse. There are no clinical trials to draw data from when it comes to wild carrot seed and contraceptive purposes, but American herbalist Robin Bennett conducted an experiment in which twelve women from New York City used 1 teaspoon of Queen Anne's lace seeds for contraception for a duration of twelve months.<sup>26</sup> Her experiment concluded that the seeds were a very good method of contraception for those women who were willing to pay close attention to their cycles.

If you are interested in using wild carrot seeds, you will have to harvest them yourself in the late summer or autumn after the seeds have matured. Most herb stores do not carry them, though they are available through a couple of mail-order herb companies. Women with a history of kidney stones or gallstones should consult with an herbalist before using Queen

Anne's lace seeds. A standard dosage of 1 teaspoon of Queen Anne's lace seeds chewed daily during ovulation and continued for up to one week has worked effectively to prevent unwanted pregnancies for women of average height and build. If you are above average height or build, you might find the seeds more effective if you slightly raise the dosage.

### *Herbal Support for Pregnancy Endings, Miscarriages, and Abortion*

Even the best contraceptive methods fail sometimes. No matter the reason why unwanted pregnancy happened, and why one may choose to end the pregnancy, herbs can be of great help and support both in a physiological and psychoemotional way. Unfortunately, even much wanted and anticipated pregnancies may also end in pregnancy loss. Abortion and miscarriage can cause physical, mental, and emotional stress and pain. Health concerns at this time include blood loss, low iron stores, fatigue, cramping and pain, stress, anxiety, PTSD, and hormonal swings. Herbs of special interest for the period following a pregnancy ending are nervine herbs, nutritives, adaptogens, antidepressant herbs, uterine tonics, and hormone balancers. Herbal care consists of calming the nervous system, providing the body with nutrients, and using herbs to support the reproductive organs.

### ***A Note About Herbal Abortions, and Why They Should Be Avoided***

There are reasons to believe that women have practiced abortions with various methods throughout time and history, and that this was widely accepted and respected as a part of women's health and agency as well as for the health and survival of families and communities. Emmenagogue herbs (herbs that help bring on menses) have been used to abort in previous times, as well as today in parts of the world where safe medical abortion is not available. But herbal abortions are potentially dangerous and should not be viewed as an alternative to accessible health care.

In recent years, as access to abortion and contraceptive services has come under attack by regressive agendas, many women have

resorted to herbalism as a way to provide reproductive wellness for themselves and others. While sovereignty and autonomy are essential to health, more must be done to fight for access to safe and welcoming health care services for all. Restricting or denying abortion access disproportionately impacts women, LGBTQ folks, migrants, youth, poor folks, people living with disabilities, tired and overworked single moms, and people of color. For post-abortion care, however, medicinal herbs do have a lot to offer for recovery and wellness.<sup>27</sup>

Nervine herbs provide soothing relief for mood balance and a tired nervous system. Hormonal changes may be strong in the period following the pregnancy ending. Feelings of relief, sadness, elation, or depression are common. Following an abortion, women are at a higher risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicide. Some women experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following a miscarriage or abortion. Meanwhile, nearly one in five women experience depression or anxiety following a miscarriage. Psychoemotional symptoms can persist for one to three years<sup>28</sup> and impact quality of life, relationships, family life, careers, and subsequent pregnancies.

Along with herbal antidepressants and stress-reducing adaptogens, herbal nervines make a healing addition to post-pregnancy loss protocols. Milky oats extract contains phytochemicals such as the triterpenoid saponins avenacins that improve mood and protect against stress. Use of milky oats benefits cognitive function and modulates the physiological response to a stressor such as pregnancy ending. Enjoy it as an infusion, best paired with nettle and red raspberry leaf.

Nutritive herbs nourish the body and bolster recovery from a pregnancy ending. Herbs with wide nutrient profiles and high amounts of bioavailable vitamins and minerals counter low iron associated with bleeding, provide nutrients essential to uterine health, and keep the nervous system nourished with nutrients associated with stable moods.

Nettle and yellow dock provide important sources of calcium, magnesium, iron, and vitamin C that prevent against anemia and fatigue. Milky

oats are rich in calcium, magnesium, and tryptophan, a precursor to the neurotransmitter serotonin (the “happy” hormone). Red raspberry leaf acts as an herbal nutritive and a uterine tonic. Nutritive herbs deliver the most benefit when they are enjoyed in the form of daily nourishing infusions.

Adaptogen herbs bring balance and equilibrium following a hormonally charged event. The impact of stress and high cortisol levels that may follow pregnancy loss make adaptogen herbs potential allies in the process. According to clinical herbalist Lisa Weiss,<sup>29</sup> specific adaptogens useful post-abortion include ashwagandha and shatavari.

Ashwagandha is an adaptogen as well as an immune stimulant, a calming nervine, and an antispasmodic useful for relieving cramping and pain, and it contains iron necessary for replenishing nutrition stores. As an adaptogen, ashwagandha acts as a mood stabilizer in clinical anxiety and depression. Ashwagandha and shatavari can be used in powder form and added to delicious plant-based elixirs, blended with nut milk and honey.

Antidepressant herbs may be useful following a pregnancy ending in miscarriage or abortion. From a hormonal perspective, the dip in estrogen and progesterone that characterizes pregnancy ending may cause depressive symptoms and low mood. Some women also experience pregnancy loss as a traumatic event, resulting in PTSD.

Symptoms of PTSD and depression include repetitive looping thoughts, excessive guilt, insomnia or oversleeping, hypervigilance, irritability, difficulty concentrating or focusing, reduced ability to make decisions, crying and weepiness, isolation, and suicidality. Herbal antidepressants include St. John’s wort, mugwort, rosemary, lemon balm, passionflower, and damiana. Multiple clinical trials demonstrate the use of St. John’s wort as an antidepressant. Mugwort acts as a mild nervine and antidepressant herb. Nervine herbs make pleasurable tinctures and can be taken daily, mixed with water or juice.

Uterine tonic herbs tone the uterus and reproductive organs. Heavy bleeding following miscarriage or abortion may warrant emergency care. However, if the bleeding is stable, uterine astringents can act as antihemorrhagic agents on the uterus. With or without bleeding, uterine tonics are recommended to strengthen the reproductive system.

Motherwort offers uterine support in the event of prolonged bleeding after a medical abortion. Red raspberry leaf, a prime uterine tonic and nutritive tonic herb, improves nutrition and circulation to the uterus and acts as an astringent tonic to relieve bleeding and pain. If painful cramps and spasms cause discomfort, uterine antispasmodics like valerian, cramp bark, wild yam, and ginger can be taken as needed in tincture form for fast and effective relief.

Hormone-balancing herbs mediate and regulate hormonal shifts. For most women, hormone levels return to normal pre-pregnancy levels within the first menstrual cycle post-abortion, and within one to nine weeks following a miscarriage. Still, hormone balancing herbs bring relief and assist the return back to reproductive wellness and balanced cycles following a pregnancy ending.

Vitex restores hormone balance, normalizes reproductive function, and reduces inflammation of the endometrium. Clinical herbalist Lisa Weiss points out that if sex hormones are having trouble returning to normal, liver function should be examined. In any case, liver herbs do have a positive influence on hormone balance: schisandra, milk thistle, and dandelion may be added to the herbal protocol for this liver-healing purpose. Use these liver herbs in tincture form or in capsules.

Taking care of your body, heart, and psyche at this time is essential. Reach out if you need help, and let herbs be your allies through the process. In this way, you'll be joining a long and ancient lineage of women and mothers who have walked this path alongside you since time immemorial.

## Endometriosis

Endometriosis is a chronic, estrogen-dependent disorder affecting women in which endometrial tissue (the endometrium) grows abnormally and adheres outside the uterus.<sup>30</sup> The most common site for wayward endometrium is the ovaries, but lesions also occur on the fallopian tubes, pelvic ligaments, and the outside of the uterus, bowel, and bladder. Called “endo” for short, it is one of the most common gynecological diseases and affects 10 to 20 percent of women of reproductive age. Because of the chronic,