

News You Can Use

Black Cohosh for Women's Health

Black cohosh relieves menopause symptoms efficiently. It's amazingly effective in short-term treatments for alleviating menopausal symptoms, especially hot flashes. Black cohosh is a good alternative for HRT. Black cohosh can supply the needed hormones to avoid the estrogen loss in women. So, black cohosh has almost the same benefits as HRT but with significantly less expense.



Native Americans for more than two hundred years have used Black Cohosh, after they discovered the root of the plant helped relieve menstrual cramps and symptoms of menopause. These days it is still used for menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes/flushes, irritability, mood- swings, and sleep disturbances. It is also used for PMS, menstrual irregularities, and uterine spasms and has been indicated for reducing inflammation associated with osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and neuralgia. Black cohosh is believed to be useful for treating a range of other complaints; including tinnitus and high blood pressure.



Herbal researcher Dr. James Duke has this to say about Black Cohosh; "Black cohosh really should be better known in this country, especially with our aging population and the millions of women who are now facing menopause. Recognized for its mild sedative and anti-inflammatory activity, black cohosh can help with hot flashes and other symptoms associated with that dramatic change of life called menopause. It's also reported to have some estrogenic activity. Herbalist Steven Foster refers to a study that compared the effects of conventional estrogen replacement therapy with black cohosh. That study looked at 60 women, younger than 40 years old, who had had complete hysterectomies and were experiencing abrupt menopause. In all groups, treatment with black cohosh compared favorably with conventional treatment."

Native Americans relied on black cohosh root to ease gynecological ailments. Today in Germany black cohosh is widely taken to relieve menopausal discomforts and is one of the primary herbs in a formula that is a natural alternative to estrogen therapy. Black cohosh has phytoestrogenic (plant estrogen) properties and helps to ease the hormonal shifts that occur during menopause. As estrogen levels drop, the pituitary gland secretes more luteinizing hormone (LH), and increased levels of LH may be responsible for many unpleasant menopausal symptoms. Studies of menopausal women show that extracts of black cohosh root reduce LH levels and relieve hot flashes, anxiety, night sweats, vaginal atrophy, and depression. Black cohosh can improve many symptoms of menopause, including uterine

problems, such as poor uterine tone, menstrual cramps, and postmenopausal vaginal dryness.

A dozen studies or more conducted throughout the 1980s and 1990s confirm that the long-standing use of black cohosh for menopausal symptoms is beneficial. For example, in one German study involving 629 women, black cohosh improved physical and psychological menopausal symptoms in more than 80% of the participants within four weeks. In a second study, 60 menopausal women were given black cohosh extract, conjugated estrogens, or diazepam (a leading anti-anxiety medication) for three months. Those who received black cohosh reported feeling significantly less depressed and anxious than those who received either estrogens or diazepam. In another study, 80 menopausal women were treated for 12 weeks with black cohosh extract, conjugated estrogens, or placebo. Black cohosh improved anxiety, menopause and vaginal symptoms. In addition, the number of hot flashes dropped from 5 to less than 1 average daily occurrences in the black cohosh group compared to those taking estrogen in whom hot flashes dropped from 5 to 3.5 daily occurrences. Other symptoms of menopause also improved after the women took black cohosh; they experienced decreased night sweats, improved sleep, and less nervous tension during the day.

Given these examples, and results of other studies, some experts have concluded that black cohosh may be a safe and effective alternative to estrogen replacement therapy (ERT) for women who cannot or will not take ERT for menopause.

The important things to remember when shopping for tablets or capsules that contain black cohosh are that the products must contain a standard 2.5% triterpene glycosides because these are the active parts in the root.

WARNINGS

Do not confuse black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) with blue cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*), which contains chemicals that may damage the heart and raise blood pressure. Do not confuse black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) with *Cimicifuga foetida*, bugbane, fairy candles, or sheng ma; these are species from the same family (*Ranunculaceae*) with different effects.

There may be side effects or dangerous interactions because of the estrogenlike properties of black cohosh; however, several studies show that black cohosh has little or no estrogenic activity and even anti-estrogenic properties. This remains an area of controversy. This herb should be used only at recommended doses.

Patients with known allergies to black cohosh or other members of the *Ranunculaceae* plant family, such as buttercup, should avoid products that contain black cohosh. In nature, black cohosh contains small amounts of salicylic acid. It is not known how much is present in commercially available preparations. As a result, patients with known allergies to aspirin or aspirin-like products, such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, including ibuprofen (Advil), should avoid black cohosh.

Scientific studies and natural medicine textbooks report that black cohosh is well tolerated by most people. The most common side effects are thought to be mild, such as stomach



discomfort and rashes, which occur infrequently.

Interactions with drugs, supplements and other herbs have not been thoroughly studied. Just because herbs are “natural” does not mean that they are not powerful. Use of herbs can be harmful. If you are taking prescription drugs, speak with a health care professional or pharmacist before using herbs or dietary supplements.

Who should not take black cohosh?

The use of black cohosh during pregnancy has not been rigorously studied. Thus, it would be prudent for pregnant women not to take black cohosh unless they do so under the supervision of their health care provider.

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- Women with breast cancer may want to avoid black cohosh until its effects on breast tissue are understood.
- Individuals with liver disorders should avoid black cohosh.

Individuals who develop symptoms of liver trouble such as abdominal pain, dark urine, or jaundice while taking the supplement should discontinue use and contact their doctor.

Yours in Good Health!

Sincerely,

Dr. Jack and Chris Ritchason
Back to Herbs Team

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