

Complementary and alternative medicines used by Australian women suffering menstrual problems

Nearly all women will experience menstrual problems at some time in their lives, the most common of which are period pain and the range of symptoms associated with premenstrual syndrome (PMS), such as irritability and/or depression, headaches and fluid retention. Whilst these problems have been treated with varying degrees of success by a variety of modern approaches, there is still a significant minority of women who continue to suffer menstrual issues, some severe enough to interfere with normal daily life.

A nationally representative survey of 7427 Australian women aged between 34-39 years were questioned about their menstrual problems in 2012 and confirmed there was indeed a high level of menstrual problems within this age group. Nearly 4% had been diagnosed with endometriosis, 41% reported experiencing PMS, 30% heavy periods, 24% severe period pain, and 22% irregular bleeding.

Details relating to women's complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) use indicated that those women diagnosed with endometriosis were around 50% more likely to have visited a massage therapist and 80% more likely to have visited an acupuncturist and were also around 80% more likely to have used vitamins/minerals, yoga/meditation and/or Chinese medicines compared to women who had not been diagnosed with endometriosis. Women who often suffered PMS were around 50% more likely than non-sufferers to have visited a massage therapist, 60% more likely to visit an osteopath and/or twice as likely to have visited a naturopath/herbalist. This group also self-prescribed a range of complementary products and practices, with around 30% more likely to use vitamins/minerals and/or yoga/meditation, nearly 50% more likely to use aromatherapy oils and/or 70% more likely to have used herbal medicines.

Women with severe period pain, irregular or heavy periods were no more likely to consult CAM practitioners than women not suffering these problems. However, some self-prescribed CAM products and practices were around 70% more likely to be used by women indicating they suffered often with severe period pain; these included aromatherapy oils and/or herbal medicines. Women who had heavy periods appeared less likely to use yoga and/or meditation than those women for whom this was not a problem.

Overall the results from this survey highlight several important points. Firstly, women appear to be using some CAM therapists and/or products at differing levels according to the type of menstrual problem they experienced. Secondly, the use of CAM practice and products is higher than the reported visits to CAM therapists suggesting that women are choosing to self-prescribe these therapies and products - a practice that is therefore unlikely to be being monitored for safety, effectiveness and/or potential interaction with pharmaceutical medicines. Thirdly, as particular types of CAM are being used differentially, some may indeed hold promise for dealing with

menstrual problems that are currently poorly or under-treated.

Women represent up to half of world populations and they are potentially affected for at least part of the 38 years during which menstruation normally occurs. Poor resolution of menstrual problems has consequences for those affected, reducing their quality of life, education and career prospects and impacting on the health and costs to society at large. Further research into the use and risk and benefits of CAM to treat menstrual issues is therefore urgently needed.

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Publication

[The use of complementary and alternative medicine by 7427 Australian women with cyclic perimenstrual pain and discomfort: a cross-sectional study.](#)

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