

# Black Cohosh

*Actea racemosa*

## Herbal Relief For Women

by Phyllis D. Light, RH, LMT

The Southern woods are primed and filled with many life enhancing and saving herbal remedies. Herbal aids for women's health issues are an abundant part of this vast plant pharmacopeia. Many of the now popular herbs available in health food stores originally made their way into the marketplace by way of their continued and successful application based on traditional uses and methods. Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) is one of these popular herbs coming into the western pharmacopeia from Native Americans who considered the root to be a supreme women's remedy. It grows in the eastern US & Canada, having white spike flowers which appear in the late spring. The US now exports the majority of wildcrafted Black cohosh to Europe where it has been used in natural hormone replacement protocols since World War II.

Numerous studies on Black cohosh have taken place in the last ten years validating both its safety and effectiveness at relieving symptoms of menopause. The spotlight especially has turned up on this amazing plant in the last year due to the collapse of a major clinical study on hormone replacement therapy. The study was halted due to the number of side effects experienced by the participants; increased risk of reproductive cancers, cardiovascular problems and ensuing deaths resulting from the study.

A 2001 study by Eckehard Liske, et al published in *The Journal of Women's Health and Gender-Based Medicine* found that Black cohosh does reduce menopause symptoms. The study also reported that doses above 40 mg. day of standardized Black cohosh do not demonstrate any therapeutic advantage at reducing hot flashes. The researchers also found that hormone levels or specific cell lines associated with some female cancers were not affected by Black cohosh. This makes it a valuable and safe aid for women who have a family history of reproductive cancers or who are experiencing hot flashes as a side-effect of chemotherapy.

A 1999, University of Pittsburgh study shows that plant phytoestrogens from Black cohosh bind directly to estrogen receptors just as natural estrogens would. This reduces menopausal symptoms while lowering leutinizing hormone (LH). A 2002 comparative study by Columbia University found Black cohosh most effective at naturally alleviating menopausal symptoms.

While the spotlight today is on Black cohosh as a natural hormone replacement therapy, many of its other traditional uses are being overlooked. For instance, it is an antispasmodic used to relieve chronic muscle pain and inflammation, especially from injuries such as whiplash or the aches and pains of muscle fatigue.



Considered a muscle relaxer and nervine, it has often been used with Valerian, Skullcap and Passion flower to relax muscles, reduce stress, and to increase duration and quality of sleep. Black cohosh, combined with Wild Cherry Bark and Mullein, is an expectorant, relaxing bronchial spasms and aiding the removal of phlegm from the bronchial area.

As an emmenagogue (menstruation aid), Black cohosh is effective at starting stalled menses. It is especially useful if the menstrual cycle is delayed due to stress. During the first trimester of pregnancy, taking this herb can sometimes cause a miscarriage. Its estrogenic-like effect can interfere with the hormone progesterone, causing a loss of the fetus if progesterone levels are low or borderline. Since Black cohosh increases blood flow to the pelvic area, its use is not recommended during menses as it may increase or prolong bleeding.

Black cohosh has traditionally been one of the herbs used in Midwives' Helper. Along with Blue Cohosh, Squawvine, and Raspberry and taken during the last two weeks of pregnancy, the formula assures an easy delivery and a strong uterus resulting in quick clamping down of the uterus, easy expulsion of the afterbirth, and minimal post-delivery bleeding. Its antispasmodic properties also help reduce pain levels during childbirth.

As a relaxing diaphoretic, Black cohosh is warming to the body and encourages sweating when taken as a hot tea. This can be especially useful for older women and men who have reduced circulation especially when taken with Cayenne. The warming qualities of Black cohosh coupled with its antispasmodic and analgesic properties contribute to its usefulness for arthritis and rheumatism.

By supporting the function and structure of the nervous system, Black cohosh's nervine properties help reduce pain whether it is associated with childbirth, arthritis, Chronic Fatigue, fibromyalgia or headache. As an alterative, Black cohosh has been used in many traditional formulas to support the function and structure of the organs which clean the blood. One of the common names for Black cohosh was Snakebite root, derived from its anti-venom properties and its powerful impact on the central nervous system.

Its estrogen-like activity allows another traditional and important use of Black cohosh which accounts for its placement in traditional cardiac formulas. Black cohosh can help to strengthen artery walls and the heart muscle. Estrogen plays a vital role in cardiac health including relaxing the arteries which increases blood flow around the body, improving vasodilation of the coronary and cerebral arteries, and decreasing vascular injury. Please keep in mind that estrogen is a broad term covering estriol, estradiol, and estrone. Black cohosh has been found to be most similar to estriol which is considered the most protective of the estrogens. This makes Black cohosh a useful herb for both men and women.

In some people, taking Black cohosh causes stomachaches. Taking it with food can ease this kind of discomfort. Generally, though, black cohosh does not cause any side effects. But if you take too much for a long period of time, you may suffer vertigo, headache, nausea, or vomiting. But if you take the amount recommended on package directions, you shouldn't have any problems. (Still, consult your healthcare provider if you have any concerns about taking Black cohosh.)

No one has reported any interactions between Black cohosh and drugs, although it may have an additive effect with hormone replacement therapy. Don't take Black cohosh during the first trimester of your pregnancy, don't take it while menstruating without medical supervision and skip it while breastfeeding. If you've had breast cancer, ovarian cancer or other reproductive cancers, or someone in your family has had those diseases, be careful about taking Black cohosh: follow package directions and consult a health practitioner.

So the message is clear: Black Cohosh can be used to ease menopausal discomforts. Ironically, if the medical establishment had paid more attention to natural methods of helping women deal with menopause, perhaps they would have never prescribed hormone replacement therapy (HRT) so often. Instead, they would have realized that herbs like black cohosh can be of great benefit without the risks that therapies like HRT can pose.

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