

Basic Gynecological Health: A Self-Help Guide for Women

By Misha Cohen, OMD, L.Ac.

To maintain a healthy reproductive system — balanced and free of disease — you must tend to the mind, body and spirit. The following tips on Chinese medicine practices will help you stay in harmony:

Tune into your cycle

Keep a daily log of information on your cycle and associated physical and emotional responses. Make these notations every day for at least 6 months. If you have a well-balanced cycle, it will help alert you to the development of any disharmonies. And if you are currently working to remedy an imbalance, it will alert you to triggers and help you track improvements.

The monthly log should include information on:

- Food cravings or times when you lose your appetite for specific foods (or food in general)
- Information on alcohol and caffeine consumption
- Energy levels and ability to exercise. Make note of times when sore breasts, overall heaviness or bloating, depression or fatigue make it difficult to exercise.
- Emotional ups and downs. Note times when you are irritable, cry or feel like crying, are angry or depressed. Also make note of times when your emotions are positive.
- Physical symptoms you suspect are associated with your cycle: headaches, blood sugar problems, insomnia, swollen ankles, tender breasts, swollen abdomen, cramps, acne, lower back pain
- Information about the quality of your period itself — date of ovulation and feelings surrounding it; date of onset and description of quality of flow, color, texture, intensity, duration.

A review of this information over the course of several months should reveal a correlation between monthly cycle, diet, exercise, emotions and physical symptoms.

This information indicates how you can control or eliminate some of the troubling symptoms associated with your cycle. You'll see which times of the month you should, for example, be particularly vigilant about exercising, avoiding stress, or avoiding foods that exacerbate symptoms

Dietary guidelines

The following are Chinese nutritional principles that promote gynecological health:

- Eat a diet of warm, cooked foods. Be particularly careful not to eat cold, raw foods during your period — it only increases cramping and discomfort. This practice can avoid the development of Cold Uterus.
- Avoid excess dairy products to decrease dampness and strengthen Spleen Qi.
- Eliminate caffeine and drink a minimal amount of alcohol. (Alcohol increases PMS symptoms and is linked to increased breast cancer risk.) Artificial stimulants of all kinds amplify gynecological disharmonies causing liver Qi stagnation and liver and heart fire.
- Eat a low-fat diet. Excess body fat increases estrogen production and can lead to various gynecological problems. A fatty diet can also increase Qi stagnation and dampness, which is associated with depression and lack of energy.
- Increase fiber and grain in diet to avoid premenstrual constipation.
- Eliminate excess salt from diet to ease water retention.
- Eliminate any foods that your daily log reveals as associated with PMS, cramps, irregularity or any of the emotional and physical symptoms surrounding the progress of your cycle.

Exercise

To regulate and move Qi and Xue so they flow smoothly, avoid excessive aerobic activities. If you're trying to reestablish a regular, symptom-free cycle, use yoga, Qi gong and walking to stimulate balanced flow. Once a routine is established (daily for 30 minutes), you can expand your exercises to include aerobics such as jogging, cycling and swimming. Exercising five times a week, 45 minutes a day, will strengthen Qi — but you should avoid exercise to the point of exhaustion or you will deplete your Qi. Your total exercise time should be about seven hours and 15 minutes per week, including the yoga and/or Qi Gong and aerobics.

If you have any gynecological disharmony, weight lifting exercises should be done only three days a week. The process of tearing down and building up muscle tissue can cause Spleen deficiency, which could lead to a Xue deficiency and increased menstrual problems.

Meditate

Stress is both a trigger and a result of gynecological problems. Meditation can alleviate the stress and diminish associated symptoms, such as premenstrual depression and anxiety.

Self-massage for preventive care

Qi Gong abdominal massage is effective while you are having cramps and, when used regularly throughout the month, it can dispel stagnation and dampness, relieving PMS and dysmenorrhea. You may use Cinnamon and Ginger infused almond oil to warm the abdomen while doing the self-massage. Reflexology on the hands and feet — particularly on the points for the abdomen, womb, uterus, lower back and brain — is also beneficial. Acupressure on Liver 3 is recommended.

Perform a monthly breast self-exam. All women over 20 years old should examine their

breasts once a month for changes in texture, shape, color of skin and evidence of discharge from the nipples. To examine the breasts effectively, the American Cancer Society suggests you examine first one side of the breast, then the other, while lying slightly to the opposite side so that the breast is distended downward. Then lie flat on the back and repeat examination of center and front. Make sure you examine the area around and in your armpit as well.

In addition to the traditional Western self-exam, Western herbalist Susan Weed advocates an herbal massage done in the bath. Not only is it less intimidating a process, but it combines the monthly check-up with stress reduction. Buy or make your own herbal oil. You can infuse olive or canola oil with fresh thyme, rosemary, basil, peppermint, rose petals, whatever you like, and proceed as follows:

- Draw a warm bath.
- Pour herbal oil into palm of hand.
- Place both hands around one breast, thumbs pointing to the ceiling, fingers cradling the breast from underneath.
- Touch the tips of your thumbs at the top of your breast and draw them down toward the nipple.
- Repeat this motion slowly, pressing down as hard as is comfortable, but spread the thumbs apart one half an inch.
- Repeat motion until your thumbs are halfway down your breast on opposite sides.
- Add more oil at any time.
- Use your fingers under your breast to draw up toward the nipple. Spread them farther and farther apart until you have massaged the whole breast.

If you repeat this at the same time in your cycle every month you will become acquainted with the texture of your breasts and become alert to any variations that may require diagnostic testing.

Nutritional supplements

For all women a daily supplement program should include:

- Essential fatty acids, such as linseed oil and evening primrose oil
- Antioxidants, such as beta carotene and vitamin E
- 1 gram of vitamin C per day
- Calcium hydroxyapatite (from organic beef bones, if possible)
- Chelated magnesium — in pill form with calcium for balanced dosage, if possible
- Daily dose of acidophilus to protect against yeast infections and keep digestive tract healthy.

*Adapted from The Chinese Way to Healing: Many Paths to Wholeness,
by Misha Ruth Cohen, OMD, L.Ac. with Kalia Doner*