

Native American Botanics

Black Cohosh - A Woman's Herb From The Woodlands

Scientific Name

Cimicifuga racemosa

Synonym: *Actaea racemosa*

Botanical Family

Ranunculaceae

Common Names

Black cohosh, black snakeroot, bugbane, bugwort, squawroot

Plant Parts Used

Roots (Rhizomes) (dried, not fresh)

Overview

Black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) root preparations are widely applauded today as safe and natural alternatives to synthetic hormones for relieving symptoms of female reproductive conditions, including menopause. Black cohosh was a popular therapy among Native Americans for treating female complaints and other disorders. It has been used for nearly half a century in Europe as a regulated herbal medicine for premenstrual discomfort, menstrual irregularities (dysmenorrhea), and menopausal symptoms. Black cohosh therapies carry less risk for breast cancer than do conventional hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Today, as new evidence reveals even more risks of using HRT than previously thought, and as complementary and alternative medicine becomes ever more popular, more women are using black cohosh in lieu of HRT.

Botanical Description

Cimicifuga racemosa (black cohosh), a member of the buttercup family, is a white-blooming perennial that grows up to five feet tall. Its striking flower stalks embellish the deciduous shady woodlands throughout Eastern United States and Canada. The plant has a stout black rhizome, straight, dark brown roots, and feathery racemes that bear small white flowers.

The thick fleshy rootstocks with their smaller, delicate rootlets are dug in the fall. Today, leaders in the herbal industry are concerned that the current popularity of black cohosh may lead to over-harvesting of this species and threaten its long-term viability.

Native American Botanics supports efforts to conserve our natural resources and encourages horticultural production of herbs for the dietary supplement market.

Chemical Constituents

Cimicifugin (macrotin), isoflavone (formononetin), triterpene glycosides (mainly xylosides, including actein, cimicifugoside, cimigoside, cimifugine, 27-deoxyacteine), aromatic acids (including ferulic, isoferulic, and salicylic acids), flavonoids (traceable amounts), volatile oil, tannins, resin, fatty acids, sugars, starch.

Medicinal Uses

Traditional Uses: emmenagogue, antispasmodic, ulcerative (blood purifier), sedative, nervine, tonic.

Clinical Applications: premenstrual syndrome, painful menstruation, menopausal-related physical symptoms (including hot flashes, heart palpitations, tinnitus, vertigo, and headaches), menopausal-related psychological symptoms (depression, nervousness, and irritability, dryness and discomfort of vaginal lining), muscular and neurological pain (arthritis, rheumatism), expectorant, mild hypertension, respiratory congestion, rheumatoid arthritis, sciatica, osteoarthritis, nervous conditions.

Pharmacological and Clinical Findings

Structure/function studies have linked the antihypertensive activity of *Cimicifuga racemosa* to actein, one of the active compounds. The plant's anti-inflammatory action is associated with erulic and isoferulic acids. Compounds such as cimicifugin (macrotin) and the isoflavone formononetin are responsible for the estrogenic



effect of black cohosh. A commercial black cohosh extract showed estrogen-like activity in some studies but not in others.

Several recent clinical studies suggest that black cohosh may be beneficial for treating menopausal symptoms. In a German clinical trial, black cohosh was well tolerated in 629 female patients. More than 80 percent of the cohort reported improvement in physical and psychological menopausal symptoms within six to eight weeks.

One of the major concerns of hormone replacement therapy with synthetic estrogen is that it stimulates the growth of estrogen-dependent, breast cancer cells. Pharmacological studies reveal that black cohosh does not do this but instead, may actually inhibit the growth of estrogen-dependent, breast cancer cells. In an in vitro study, black cohosh extract suppressed the rate of growth of breast carcinoma cells.

During menopause, the sudden release of luteinizing hormone (LH) leads to hot flashes, rapid heart palpitations, headaches, and a thinning of the vaginal lining. Black cohosh prevents the release of luteinizing hormone and decreases the hormone's ability to bind with receptors in the hypothalamus. However, black cohosh has not shown any effect on follicle-stimulating hormone or prolactin release.

In a double-blind study of 60 patients, black cohosh was more effective than either conjugated estrogens or diazepam (Valium) in relieving symptoms of menopausal depression and anxiety. The women taking black cohosh had fewer daily hot flashes than those taking estrogen. The black cohosh group also had a slight thickening of the vaginal lining due to an increased number of superficial cells in the vaginal lining.

Some studies suggest that black cohosh may have anti-estrogenic activity, but the exact mechanism of action is not yet known. Recent findings indicate that black cohosh extracts do not bind to the estrogen receptor or up-regulate estrogen-dependent gene. Nor does black cohosh stimulate the growth of estrogen-dependent tumors in animal models. Other research shows that *Cimicifuga racemosa* may have favorable effects on bone metabolism, thereby countering osteoporosis associated with menopause. The scientific evidence strongly suggests that black cohosh is a beneficial adjunct therapy for menopausal symptoms, including long-term potential complications such as osteoporosis.

Dosage Range

Powdered root or as tea: 1 to 2 g 3 times per day

Safety

Black cohosh is generally safe when taken as directed.

Side Effects

Black cohosh may occasionally cause mild gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. Other side effects such as headaches, joint pain, dizziness, visual dimness, tremors, and bradycardia have been reported. If these symptoms occur, stop taking black cohosh and consult a qualified health care provider.

Warnings/Contraindications/Precautions

Pregnant and lactating women should not take black cohosh unless it is prescribed by a qualified health care provider to stimulate labor during late pregnancy. The herb should also be avoided by individuals with a history of breast cancer, uterine fibroids, fibrocystic breast disease, endometriosis, unexplained uterine bleeding, liver and gallbladder disease, or pancreatitis,

Interactions

None reported

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