

Developing Treatments



Treatments for women: 'Female Weakness'

Until the 20th century the medical profession was almost exclusively male. A doctor's knowledge of female complaints was inevitably second-hand. Some male doctors seem to have had a surprisingly incomplete understanding of women's conditions. For example one medical writer, describing the symptoms of the menopause in 1809, makes no mention of hot flushes. He does, however, cite apoplectic fits as a common symptom.

The degree to which different conditions have been medicalised has varied greatly. The history of the treatments of amenorrhoea (absence of periods) and the menopause are two examples of this.

The fact that women bear children gives rise to some health problems that only women experience. Other medical conditions afflict both sexes, but have been viewed by both patients and professionals as ones to which women are particularly prone.

Treatments for women: Amenorrhea

Amenorrhea is an absence of periods. Medical guides written in the 1800s give the impression that few things troubled a doctor more than a woman who wasn't menstruating regularly. Doctors believed it could be disastrous for her physical and mental health. (Of course, doctors were only concerned about it if the woman was not pregnant.)

Herbs have commonly been used to treat this condition. Women could grow plants like mugwort for themselves. Physicians offered more exotic cures. Myrrh was used for centuries and one physician writing in the 1600s recommended Egyptian mummy.

Providing there is no underlying disorder to account for it, and a woman is still ovulating, it is not a cause for concern today. Delayed puberty, stress, weight loss and strenuous exercise can all be a cause. Today, if it is treated at all, it is with hormones.



**Picture shows:
Bromural “Knoll”, 1908-1914
Knoll**

Many medicines in the 1800s and early 1900s were sold as good for “female weakness”. The wording on this ‘balm for the nerves’ makes no reference to women, but it is marketed with the image of a distressed woman.

Mummified Hand, Egyptian?

“Two drachms of mummy” was a key ingredient in a medicine prescribed “to provoke the flowers” [i.e. stimulate periods].

This was recorded in a book on midwifery written by James Wolveridge in 1671. The mummified flesh would be ground into a powder, mixed with other ingredients, and taken in white wine.

This specimen has been analysed and is believed to be genuine Egyptian mummy, although ‘fake’ mummy was used in medicine. It came from a collection of examples of medicinal ingredients created in the 1700s.

Tin for Mugwort, early 20th century

Mugwort was another traditional herbal treatment for amenorrhea. This was a plant that women in Britain could grow for themselves. Gabrielle Hatfield, at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, collects information on how plants have been used within living memory. One elderly man recalled that his father grew mugwort specifically for “irregularities peculiar to women”.

Drug jar for Electuary of Cassia, 1750-1770

Cassia is a coarse form of cinnamon. It has been used for centuries to restore periods.

The pulp, when “extracted with violet water, is a most sweet and pleasant medicine, and may be given without danger to all weak people of what age and sex soever they be.” *The Herbal*, John Gerard, 1633 edition

Jar for Myrrh, 1800s

Myrrh is gum from the bark of the tree *Commiphora*. It is known that the Ancient Greeks used it to treat amenorrhea. In the 1800s doctors frequently prescribed ‘Griffiths Myrrh Mixture’ for the same reason. Myrrh was an ingredient in some of the Female Pills that women took for menstrual irregularities.

Provera, 2001

Pharmacia and Upjohn S.p.A.

This is an example of a modern hormonal treatment for amenorrhea. The active ingredient is medroxyprogesterone, which is similar to the natural female hormone progesterone. This will restore periods if they are absent due to an hormonal imbalance.

Treatments for women: For amenorrhea – or abortion?

It is a fact that most substances used to stimulate the return of periods, can also trigger an abortion. This is something that woman took advantage of until abortion was legalised in 1968.

Pennyroyal, and other substances which could induce abortions, were common ingredients in Female Pills sold between the 1700s and the early 20th century. Female Pills were ostensibly sold to remedy amenorrhea. However, they were notorious for their effectiveness in bringing about an abortion. Manufacturers never openly stated this 'benefit', but it was widely known and definitely increased sales.

Pennyroyal, modern sample

Pennyroyal has been used as an emmenagogue (a drug or medicine to treat amenorrhea) since the time of the Ancient Greeks. They also used it to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Women continued to take it for both purposes into the 20th century. In 1937 the Joint Committee of Midwifery were very concerned about its use by women seeking an abortion. Even though it had a legitimate use as an emmenagogue, they called for the sale of essential oil of pennyroyal to be restricted. Today it is sold with a warning of the risk of miscarriage.



Female Pills, first half of 20th century

Female Pills produced between the 1700s and the mid 20th century served two purposes – one legitimate, and the other more shadowy. Ostensibly pharmacists sold them to treat amenorrhea and other problems associated with menstruation. Unofficially, and illegally, they were bought by women desperate to obtain an abortion. The claim that they could remove 'obstructions' preventing periods was deliberately ambiguous.

Some manufacturers warned that if their product was taken by a pregnant lady it would certainly result in a miscarriage. This, seemingly responsible warning, was in fact a clever way of getting around the law, and clearly advertising that their Female Pills could abort an unwanted child.

Most of these examples contain iron sulphate, which can trigger an abortion.

Treatments for women: Period pain (dysmenorrhea)

For this condition, Butler's Medical Chest Directory of 1837, recommended two drugs that had been used for centuries – opium and henbane. That was if being bled with leeches, a tepid bath, and lying quiet “in a recumbent posture” had not worked.

Victorian doctors held up cannabis as particularly useful. In fact, Queen Victoria herself took cannabis each month.

Until recently, Ibuprofen was the only drug licensed to treat dysmenorrhoea that a woman could obtain without prescription. It may soon be joined by Naproxen, previously a 'Prescription Only Medicine'.

Opium gum, in early 20th century specimen jar

The Ancient Egyptians valued opium as a painkiller. It was still the most widely prescribed painkiller in the 1800s. Sufferers used it to reduce pain of every kind, including dysmenorrhea.

“When the [menstrual] pain is very severe...allay it with opium” Simon Bard, *Theory & Practice of Midwifery*, 1807.

Spirit of Camphor, 1800s

Some doctors recommended taking opium in conjunction with camphor.

[Opium with camphor] “is of the greatest service in arresting pain arising from difficult menstruation.” *Cox's Companion to the Family Medicine Chest*, 1845

Henbane, 1800s

Henbane was a traditional herbal remedy for period pain. This pot of extract of henbane comes from a home medicine chest, where it would have been readily available to the women of the family.

Cannabis, 1800s

Like opium, people have used cannabis has been used for pain relief for thousands of years. However, it was most extensively used in the 1800s, as an alternative to addictive opiates. Queen Victoria's personal physician valued it very highly.

By the 20th century cannabis was becoming viewed more as an intoxicant than a medicine. Its use in this country was made illegal in 1971.



Haemitin liquid, first half of 20th century

Haemitin Co.

An alternative to general painkillers, this preparation was specially formulated to relieve “excessive and painful menstruation”. It was first sold in 1908 and, typically for that date, it claimed to cure multiple conditions. Apparently it was also beneficial for blood disorders, boils, pimples, all types of anaemia, and tiredness.

EP Tablets, 1970s-1980s

Eucryl Ltd.

This is an unusual example of a late 20th century painkiller that pharmacists sold specifically to treat “the low, depressing ache of period pain”. Most modern painkillers are marketed as products that can treat pain of various kinds, of which menstrual pain is just one. The manufacturer promised women that with EP Tablets “you can feel serene and relaxed even on difficult days”.

These tablets targeted period pain in particular because they contained ephedrine which controls muscle spasm in the womb.

Cuprofen tablets, around 2002

Cupal Ltd.

Ibuprofen, readily available over-the-counter, is currently the most popular analgesic for period pain.

Naproxen tablets, around 1991

Generics [UK] Limited

Like ibuprofen, Naproxen is specifically licensed to treat dysmenorrhoea. It used to be available on prescription only. However, it is currently being considered for reclassification as a Pharmacy Medicine.

Treatments for women: hysteria & panic attack

Historically hysteria was considered a female affliction. Ancient Greeks said it was caused by movements of the womb. The womb/hysteria link persisted for centuries.

An hysteric was said to feel a ball rise from abdomen to throat. This “hysteric ball” made her believe she was suffocating. She would also sob, convulse and pass out. Woman today do not display this combination of symptoms. Is the modern equivalent the panic attack? Twice as many women experience panic attacks as men.

Spirit of Lavender and Sal Volatile were common treatments for hysteria in the 1800s. Today panic attack sufferers can take certain antidepressants or benzodiazepines.

Hysteria

Today we use the term hysteria to describe someone in an extreme emotional state, alternately laughing and crying. In the past however, ‘hysteria’ referred to a very specific set of symptoms. In the 1800s one medical writer suggested that the reason so many young women displayed these symptoms was because they believed it proof of their femininity.





Mugwort, modern sample

This herb was considered a friend to women. It has a long history as a remedy for amenorrhea. Women were also given it to combat hysteria.

Spirit of Lavender and Sal Volatile, 1800s

Bottles of spirit of lavender and sal volatile were commonly found in home medicine chests in the 1800s. This was because taken in combination they were much valued as a treatment for hysteria.

Doctors and patients also believed them to be beneficial when taken separately.

Spirit of Hartshorn, 1800s

Richard Reece, who wrote *The Medical Guide* in 1809, was convinced of the benefits of spirit of hartshorn. "From twenty to thirty drops, taken in a glass of water, often affords immediate relief in cases of...hysterical fits; it may likewise, in such cases, be rubbed on the temples, and applied to the nostrils."

Smelling Salts Bottle, 1800s

This double-ended bottle would have contained volatile smelling salt, to bring round a woman who had passed out whilst hysterical, or lost consciousness for any other reason.

Some doctors were concerned that volatile smelling salt could damage the sense of smell. Because of this, Richard Reece (*The Medical Guide*, 1809) stated "It should therefore only be employed in cases of apparent suspension of the vital functions, as fainting and hysterical fits."

Tincture of Valerian, 1945-1965 Stafford Allen & Sons Ltd.

In the 1800s doctors gave valerian to an hysterical woman after she had collapsed. It was given to her as soon as she had revived sufficiently to swallow.

Panic Attack

The majority of sufferers experience their first panic attack as a result of being generally stressed by situations such as divorce or problems at work. Panic attacks have been linked to anxiety disorder. A survey in America showed that 75% of individuals with generalised anxiety disorder are women.

Seroxat tablets (paroxetine), around 1992 Smith Kline & French Laboratories

Seroxat is a SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor). Today panic attack sufferers take SSRIs more than any other drug treatment. Significant improvement is usually seen within 6-8 weeks.

Sedapam tablets, 1976-1980

Duncan Flockhart & Co. Ltd.

Sedapam is a brand of diazepam. Diazepam belongs to the class of drugs called benzodiazepines. These can produce almost immediate relief from the distressing symptoms of panic attacks. However, they are addictive. For this reason, patients usually take diazepam for no longer than four weeks at a time.

Dothiepin tablets, 1997

Approved Prescription Services Ltd.

Dothiepin is a tricyclic antidepressant. This class of antidepressant, introduced in the 1950s, was the first medication shown to have a beneficial effect against panic disorders. However, doctors avoid prescribing them if the patient might be suicidal. This is because if an overdose is taken there is a very high risk of death.

Treatments for women: Green sickness (or chlorosis)

Green sickness, or chlorosis, was a mysterious illness. It was first diagnosed in 1554, and the last reported case was in the 1930s.

Another name was 'disease of the virgins', as it affected girls at puberty. The sufferer would be deathly pale – even 'green'. She would be weak, eating little and have no periods. She might even crave non-foods, such as chalk and ashes. Today would we diagnose it as delayed puberty, anaemia, or anorexia?

Doctors certainly offered medicinal remedies. However, from the 1600s to the 1800s, the most certain cure was said to be an immediate marriage.

Epsom Salts, 1800s

Chalybeate waters, such as those naturally occurring at Bath Spa, were a standard remedy for green sickness in the 1800s. A poor man's version could be made with Epsom salts. This was achieved by dissolving an ounce of Epsom salts in a quart of distilled water, and adding two or three grains of salt of steel.

Myrrh, 20th century

Myrrh is a substance that women have taken in past centuries for a number of female conditions, such as amenorrhea. Green sickness was another affliction for which it was believed to be beneficial. Richard Reece asserted that "The best method of administering myrrh in cases of green sickness, is in the form of pills, combined with steel, gentian and aloes." *The Medical Guide*, 1809.

Quinine, 1800s



As one of the reported symptoms of green sickness was extreme weakness and general debilitation, doctors in the 1800s frequently recommended tonics. Quinine was valued as one such tonic.

Dr John Hooper's Female Pills, around 1961

Dr John Hooper's Female Pills were first sold in the 1700s. At that time they were claimed to be the best medicine ever discovered for green sickness.

Treatments for women: The menopause

At the menopause a woman ceases to have periods and her reproductive years end. Symptoms include hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings. Until the 20th century doctors took little interest in 'the turn of life'. Now it is a highly medicalised condition. The market is flooded with different brands of HRT (hormone replacement therapy).

In 1809 one medical writer simply recommended exercise and 'abstemious diet'. Early 20th century doctors offered reassurance and sedatives. Hormone treatment dates from 1897. HRT is prescribed, for a limited period, to correct oestrogen deficiency, which begins with the menopause and lasts the rest of a woman's life.

Typically around the age of 50, a woman's periods become irregular and eventually cease altogether. This causes her levels of oestrogen to fall dramatically. Now that women can be expected to live into their 80s this is becoming more of a problem than when life expectancy was shorter. This is because oestrogen deficiency contributes to many of the diseases of old age. This includes heart disease, stroke and osteoporosis. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can counter this. However, there are risks associated with extended use. For this reason doctors often recommend that it is taken for no more than 10 years.

Many women believe that HRT will keep them youthful. Unfortunately the idea that it can delay the onset of ageing is just a myth.

Compound Colocynth Pills, mid 20th century Cox

In the 1800s and 1900s some doctors believed that constipation contributed to unwelcome symptoms of the menopause. They therefore sought to alleviate these by prescribing Compound Colocynth Pills, a powerful laxative.

Hexital tablets (phenobarbital & hexoestrol), 1940-1970 Ortho Pharmaceutical Ltd.

In the first half of the 20th century many doctors held the view that a menopausal women did not require treatment. Therefore, although HRT was available they thought it too extreme an intervention. However, they were willing to prescribe sedatives to ease anxiety. One doctor stated that sedatives could also "assist with the period of mental reorientation". Phenobarbital was the sedative of choice.

Hexital combined the benefits of sedatives and hormone treatment. It comprises phenobarbital and hexoestrol, which is a synthetic oestrogen.





Athera tablets, 1950-1965

An alternative to sedatives and HRT, Athera was “a pure herbal product for disorders of ‘the change’”. Its ingredients are senna leaf, rue, coltsfoot, orange flower, orange leaves, hops, aqueous extract of broom, raspberry leaves, clivers, parsley, nettles and mistletoe.

Premarin, tablets, 1976-1982

Ayerst Laboratories Ltd.

Premarin, launched in 1941, was one of the first brand of HRT created with oestrogen extracted from the urine of pregnant mares. This ‘conjugated equine oestrogen’ solved the problem of poor absorption of natural oestrogen.

A 1959 advert for Premarin emphasised that this product could meet both the physiological and psychological needs of menopausal women:

“When, because of the menopause, the psyche needs nursing – ‘Premarin’ nurses. When hot flushes need suppressing, ‘Premarin’ suppresses. In short, when you want to treat the whole menopause...let your choice be ‘Premarin’”.

A range of present day HRT brands

There is no lack of choice for women opting for hormone replacement therapy. Derivatives of the hormone oestrogen are an essential component of HRT, in order to raise oestrogen levels to pre-menopausal levels. However most brands of HRT also contain progesterone. This is to counter the risk of cancer of the uterus, which is increased by oestrogen-only HRT.

The brands displayed here include examples of tablets, patches and implants. Some are oestrogen only, as they are intended for women who have had an hysterectomy, and therefore are not at risk of uterine cancer.

