

PMS & Hemp: A Winning Combination

By Martine Carlina

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) is a disorder that affects many women during the one to two weeks before menstruation begins. For many years PMS was dismissed as a psychological problem. However, more recently it is being acknowledged as a genuine physiological syndrome.

Symptoms of PMS may include abdominal bloating, acne, anxiety, backache, breast swelling and tenderness, cramps, depression, food cravings, fatigue, headaches, insomnia, joint pain, nervousness, skin eruptions, water retention, and personality changes. It is estimated that 70% of women experience some variation of PMS symptoms.

One of the causes of PMS is a hormonal imbalance in which the body produces excessive levels of estrogen and reduced levels of progesterone. These hormonal fluctuations can affect circulation, by reducing the amount of oxygen reaching the woman's uterus, ovaries, and brain. Unstable blood sugar levels as well as food allergies and sensitivities are also known to be contributing factors to PMS. Most recently PMS has also been linked to a deficiency in essential fatty acids, specifically the inhibited conversion of GLA or gamma-linolenic acid from omega-6 fatty acids.

GLA is produced in the body by the natural metabolic conversion of linoleic acid (omega-6), which is an essential fatty acid. Although the body produces up to 20 fatty acids, both omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids cannot be manufactured by the body and must be obtained from the regular nutritional regime. Omega-6 fatty acids are found in a variety of foods, including hemp, corn, sunflower, safflower, soy, flax and peanuts. Once ingested, omega-6 is further metabolized into GLA.

It has been discovered that in women with PMS the conversion of dietary omega-6 or linoleic acid to GLA is often compromised. This can result in a deficiency of GLA. Research also indicates that women who are deficient in GLA can be oversensitive to the hormone prolactin, which is linked to breast pain. GLA appears to benefit about half of women with the painful menstrual-related condition known as fibrocystic breasts. By helping to stabilize hormone levels and reduce inflammation, it is possible that GLA might also ease bloating, cramping, and other PMS discomforts.

As many women have impaired conversion of omega-6 to GLA, it is important to supplement GLA from other sources. Although GLA is rare it can be found in four primary sources. Hemp, borage, evening primrose, and blackcurrant oils all contain GLA in varying amounts. Hempseed oil contains between 2 and 4.5% GLA depending on the variety of hemp. Borage oil is 20-24%, and primrose contains about 14%.

Hempseed oil is particularly useful as a GLA source as it also contains a perfect balance of omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids. These essential fats are known to help regulate blood sugar levels, which are also causally related to PMS. Although the level of GLA in hemp may look low in comparison to the other GLA sources, hempseed oil can be found in bulk liquid form and the valuable GLA can thus be obtained quite economically in this form as compared to small dose capsules of primrose, borage, and blackcurrant oils.

As a food ingredient, hempseed oil has a light nutty flavor, and is ideal as a condiment in salads, dips, appetizers, and a host of other recipes. Because it is so light, it is easily mixed in power drinks, smoothies, and may be used as a butter substitute for potatoes, popcorn, and vegetables.

It is recommended that women suffering from PMS take approximately 500-1000 mg of GLA daily. One tablespoon of hempseed oil at 4% GLA would give a delicious 600 mg of GLA.

PMS is a monthly battle for many women. It affects not only them, but also their immediate family, their work and recreation. We now know that PMS is not merely psychological and that in fact it is a physiological reality. Many women have found that GLA has been instrumental in changing the monthly nightmare of PMS into an altogether more pleasant experience for them and those around them.