Chapter 16

Vitex agnus-castus

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SUMMARY

Vitex agnus-castus is an herb that has been used for hundreds of years in Europe for female reproductive system disorders, is well-tolerated, and has established efficacy in helping with some symptoms associated with premenstrual syndrome. The major active constituents of V. agnus-castus are iridoid glycosides, flavonoids, alkaloids, and essential oils. Its dominant pharmacological effect on the body is inhibition of prolactin secretion. V. agnus-castus is available in a variety of dosage forms and its use is gaining popularity in the United States. Although it has a low adverse-effect profile, women should avoid ingesting the herb while trying to become pregnant, during pregnancy, or while nursing.

Key Words: Chasteberry; flavonoids; flavones; essential fatty acids; female reproductive system disorders; estrogenic herbs.

1. HISTORY

Vitex agnus-castus is a botanical plant that has the following National Oceanographic Data Center Taxonomic Code: Kingdom, Plantae; Phylum, Tracheobionta; Class, Magnoliopsida; Order, Lamiales; Family, Verbenaceae; Genus, Vitex L.; Species, Vitex agnus-castus L. The genus name Vitex is a Latin derivation for plaiting or weaving. The species name agnus-castus combines two Latin word origins: “agnus,” which means lamb, and “castitas,” which means chastity (1).

V. agnus-castus is a large deciduous shrub, native to Mediterranean countries and central Asia, and is also used in America as an ornamental plant (2).
*V. agnus-castus* has long, finger-shaped leaves and displays fragrant blue-violet flowers in midsummer. Its fruit is a very dark-purple berry that is yellowish inside, resembles a peppercorn, and has an aromatic odor. Upon ripening, the berry is picked and allowed to dry (1,3,4). The twigs of this shrub are very flexible and were used for furniture in ancient times (2).

References to *V. agnus-castus* go back more than 2000 years, describing it as a healing herb (2). Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans used it for a variety of health problems. In 400 BCE, Hippocrates recommended chaste tree for injuries and inflammation (1,2). Four centuries later, Greek botanist Dioscorides recommended *V. agnus-castus* specifically for inflammation of the womb and lactation (1,2). Use of *V. agnus-castus* continued into the Middle Ages, where folklore persists that medieval monks chewed *V. agnus-castus* tree parts to maintain their celibacy, used the dried berries in their food, or placed the berries in the pockets of their robes in order to reduce sexual desire; thus, the synonym of Monk’s pepper (2,4,5). Use of *V. agnus-castus* has persisted to modern times. Though its use was initially concentrated in the Mediterranean area, its popularity has increased in England and America since the mid-1900s (2).

Traditional medicinal uses of *V. agnus-castus* lie predominantly around the oral ingestion of the shrub’s fruit (4–6); however, other plant parts such as leaves and flowers have been used in some preparations (7,8). The dry or liquid extract of, or oils from, the berry have been used for a variety of symptoms, most commonly related to the female reproductive system (5,9,10). Other uses include the treatment of hangovers, flatulence, fevers, benign prostatic hyperplasia, nervousness, dementia, rheumatic conditions, colds, dyspepsia, spleen disorders, constipation, and promoting urination (5,10). Traditional topical medicinal uses of *V. agnus-castus* include acne, body inflammation, and insect bites and stings (5). Use of *V. agnus-castus* is not commonly employed in traditional Chinese medicine or traditional Indian medicine (Ayurveda); however, other *Vitex* species (*negundo, trifoliata*) are used in these therapies.

2. **Current Promoted Uses**

Current promoted uses of *V. agnus-castus* relate to treatment of disorders of the female reproductive system such as short menstrual cycles, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and breast swelling and pain (mastodynia/mastalgia). The Commission E has approved the use of *V. agnus-castus* for irregularities of the menstrual cycle, premenstrual complaints, and mastalgia (10,11). Recent randomized, placebo-controlled studies have been conducted.