



Q Over the past decade, there have been several tragedies and deaths in my immediate family. I am finding it hard to cope with the burden of grief. Can you recommend anything that might help me?

Name and address withheld

A *Sutherlandia frutescens* is a South African plant that has long been used to support anyone suffering from extreme emotional distress, especially grief. The widows of slain Zulu warriors were given it as a gentle tranquilliser during the mourning period.

When I first wrote about this herb, five years ago, there was a sustained debate over concerns about toxicity. Thanks to independent studies by the Indigenous Knowledge Systems division of the Medical Research Council of South Africa, this has now been resolved. If you search the internet, you will discover that the controversy centred on the low-level presence in sutherlandia of a chemical called *canavanine*. Subsequent animal studies at levels five times higher than the recommended therapeutic dose have proved that there are no toxic side effects.

One of the key active chemicals in the plant is *gamma-aminobutyric acid*, which is used to help relieve anxiety, depression and stress. You can order a new supplement, *Filisa* (pronounced *feelisa*) from the African-remedy specialists The Little Herbal Company (01484 685390, www.littleherbal.co.uk); 120 vegetarian capsules cost £24.50, plus £1.50 p&p. Although animal studies were relied on for safety investigations by researchers, this supplement has not been tested on animals. Take 2x 200mg capsules twice daily after food, to reduce any risk of nausea or dizziness (these are the only two rare side effects reported among already weakened patients).

Q I suffer badly from restless leg syndrome, which is always

much worse at night. Is there anything I can take to alleviate the symptoms?

I Robinson, e-mail

A This condition is characterised by unpleasant tickling, burning or aching sensations in the muscles of the legs. Symptoms tend to come on at night, in bed, though prolonged inactivity can also heighten the discomfort.

The supplement you should use to tackle this problem is magnesium, which can relax the nerves that trigger the unpleasant sensations. The brand to try is Nature's Plus Dyno-Mins Magnesium, which provides a therapeutic dose of 250mg of magnesium per tablet; take one tablet daily after your main meal of the day.

You may also benefit from taking a remedy such as butcher's broom, which can enhance circulation, particularly to the tissues of the lower limbs. This will improve the flow of oxygen to affected tissues and help to deliver crucial nutrients, including magnesium and calcium, to those muscles. Nature's Way Butcher's Broom provides 470mg of the active agents per capsule; take three capsules daily.

Nature's Plus Dyno-Mins Magnesium costs £12.05 for 90 tablets, and Nature's Way Butcher's Broom costs £9.95 for 100 capsules, both from Victoria Health (0800 413596, www.victoriahealth.com). There are no known contraindications for butcher's broom.

Q My sister has told me that chromium is the latest "cancer scare", and I wondered what your advice is on this.

F Barker, London

A The controversy over chromium is nothing new. In fact, claims and counterclaims ping-pong back and forth between scientists and experts

with such regularity that the best I can do is to update you on the current "establishment" position, which is that chromium is probably safe. Even the UK's Food Standards Agency has backtracked on earlier advice against taking this supplement, so it is no wonder that consumers are confused.

Chromium is widely incorporated in a range of supplements, with purposes as diverse as weight loss, body building and the management of type 2 diabetes.

It is often provided in the form of chromium picolinate, which is said to be more easily absorbed by the body, and it is in this form that it has given rise to concern. Test-tube studies suggested that it could damage the genetic material of animal cells.

You have not specified the reason for your interest in chromium, but because it occurs naturally in many foods, including whole grains, cereals and seafood, you should eat a balanced diet, which includes these, to ensure that you do not suffer from any deficiency.

For anyone who wants to use a chromium supplement, Vitamins Research Products makes chromium picolinate capsules, each of which provides a therapeutic dose of 200 micrograms; 120 capsules cost £9.95 from The Nutri Centre (0800 587 2290, www.nutricentre.com).

For more information on natural health, visit my website: www.whatealysworks.co.uk

If you have any questions or tips, write to *What's the Alternative?* Style, The Sunday Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E9B 1ST. We can only provide replies to published letters.

Before following any medical or dietary advice in this column, please consult your GP if you suffer from any health problems or special conditions, or are in doubt as to its suitability.