

What's the alternat

Q I have recently been diagnosed with lupus, and have heard that something called the African potato remedy might help. I've asked in a number of health shops, but most have never even heard of it. Can you tell me about it?

Miss L. Alderson, Liverpool

A An autoimmune disease that can cause either a recurring red skin rash (discoid lupus) or inflammation of the joints, tendons, connective tissue and other organs (systemic lupus), this condition usually affects young women in their late teens to thirties. Autoimmune simply means that instead of protecting the body, the immune system attacks it.

The African potato has been used for generations by Zulu tribes to treat skin diseases, colds and flu. Now, immunologists at St James's Hospital in Leeds are investigating its potency as a natural remedy to help combat autoimmune diseases such as ME, MS, asthma and lupus. The science of immunology is relatively young, which means there is still a lot about the immune system and its functioning that we don't know. That said, the scientists in Leeds have shown that the African potato really does work to boost leukocytes — white blood cells that help the body ward off disease and bolster immune function. This action is thanks to the presence in the plant of natural, hormone-like substances called sterols.

I was first alerted to the potential of the African potato by Lesley Robinson, a woman who held a senior position with a pharmaceutical company for 16 years before coming over to the other side and setting up her own business, The Little Herbal Company.

Robinson launched Simba — an African potato supplement — in the UK last year, and says: "People with ME who have been taking it say it takes away that horrible zombie-like state of mind, while people with MS tell us it seems to help improve co-ordination. We've been getting very good results with many autoimmune problems, including lupus, and now that it's been tested in the laboratory, we really can say it does exactly what we've said it does."

■ Simba costs £24.50 for a month's supply. Take three capsules a day, one hour before eating. For more information, visit www.littleherbal.co.uk. To order, call 01484 685100



Q I am in my mid-fifties and have started to suffer from heavy menstrual bleeding, twice monthly. My GP says this is not uncommon in women my age, but the strain of it is starting to affect my job, marriage and lifestyle. Is there a natural remedy that could help ease the situation?

Name and address withheld

A Since the average age for the onset of menopause in British women is 51 years, I will assume this is one of the symptoms of menopause that you are having to tolerate. So I'm recommending herbs and books that will assist all women coping with what is, after all, a natural, if difficult, rite of passage.

The best known of all the hormone-balancing herbs is *agrus castus*, or vitex, which works on the pituitary gland, the controller of the endocrine system. It will work long-term to rebalance your hormones.

Although it does not contain hormones, it stimulates the production of luteinizing hormone, which in turn regulates the production of the hormone progesterone. For best effects,

take 40 drops of a good-quality vitex tincture with water at the start of your day.

Another herb that can help to alleviate heavy menstrual bleeding is yarrow. Although there have been no clinical studies in humans, the body of empirical evidence is excellent, so this is another remedy that is well worth investigating.

What you eat can have a dramatic effect on the symptoms of menopause, so invest in a copy of Linda Kearns's new book, *Eat To Beat Menopause* (Thorsons £9.99).

Q Given a positive PSA test for prostate cancer, what else to do? I have been taking zinc and saw palmetto daily for 20 years, with no noticeable adverse effects. I'm now 82, so perhaps I shall die with prostate cancer, rather than from it.

Mr T Wilkinson, Staffordshire

A Your letter, being more in the way of comment than query, gives me the perfect excuse to recommend an excellent booklet called *Prostate: No Need To Suffer!*, which recognises that prostate problems