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Aromatic Wisdom Podcast Episode #23

ASK LIZ: What are the Best Essential Oils for Menstrual Cramps?

This is the Aromatic Wisdom Podcast, Episode 23. In this Ask Liz episode I'm going to answer a listener question who wrote and asked what are the best essential oils for menstrual cramps.

You're listening to the Aromatic Wisdom Podcast with your host, Liz Fulcher.

If you're interested in learning about Essential Oils, hearing interviews with industry experts, and discovering ways to grow your own Aromatherapy business, this is the podcast for you.

For more information and show notes, visit the website at www.AromaticWisdomInstitute.com. Now sit back. Relax. Take a deep breath and enjoy as Liz shares a dose of Aromatic Wisdom.

Hi, everyone and thanks so much for being here again today. If it's your first time welcome and thanks for joining us. My name is Liz Fulcher and I am a clinical aromatherapist and I've been working with essential oils and practicing the art and science of aromatherapy for just about 25 years—May 24th to be exact is my 25th anniversary. I am the host for this podcast, and with each episode I talk about some aspect of the world of aromatherapy and essential oils and aromatics. I have a school called The Aromatic Wisdom Institute where I teach essential oil use. If you go to the website: www.aromaticwisdominstitute.com you can learn a lot more about what I offer.

I'm going to do something a little different today—I'm going to try something new. The normal format for this program is about 30 minutes long; I have a welcome; I say hello and share any announcements; then I get right into the topic and that's about 20 minutes long. I had been finishing with two segments: the first is called "Smell My Life" and the second is called "Ask Liz" where I answer a listener's question. I'm going to change it up a little bit in that I'm going to drop the "Ask Liz" segment out of my regular podcast and, instead, make that an episode unto itself. So keep writing to me and asking questions. Instead of tacking it on to the end of an episode about something else -because it seemed a little cluttered to me; it was just too much information in one



podcast- I thought, I'm just going to take the "Ask Liz" questions people send me and I'm going to make a whole episode about that [topic].

Also, I can go a lot deeper into answering the questions that you send me. I won't be doing this every week. It will probably be every two or three episodes; it depends on how many questions I get, truthfully. So, today's topic came from Ahsamon from Portland, Oregon. I don't know the origin of your name, but it is beautiful! And Ahsamon wrote this:

Hi, Liz! I love your podcast and I always look forward to new episodes and am so grateful that you share your wisdom and all things aromatherapy.

I was wondering if you could recommend any essential oils for menstrual cramps.

*Many thanks,
Ahsamon*

Thank you so much for writing, honey, it is an excellent question. Many women suffer every month before and during their period and I am so happy to share that there are some essential oils that can be helpful for this.

First I'm going to talk about what happens when you get cramps; what are the symptoms of cramps; what causes the cramping and what are the oils that can help relax the cramping, that are soothing and that are good for pain, and just in general, to help you relax.

The medical term for menstrual cramps is *dysmenorrhea*, which simply means spastic abdominal cramping at the onset of menstruation, usually lasting for two to three days. Two to three days may not sound long but I can tell you, that when you've got those cramps it's kind of like life stops. Now some women are fine. They don't get cramping very much or it's super mild; they can go about their business, go to work. Other women have cramping so bad they have to stay in bed for a couple of days until it passes. For some women it really is a big problem in their life that having menstrual cramps that are so bad that they really can't function for a couple of days.

The condition is called *dysmenorrhea* and there are two types: primary and secondary.

Primary dysmenorrhea is common menstrual cramps for which there is no underlying gynecological problem that is causing the pain.



Secondary dysmenorrhea is pain that is caused by some disorder in the reproductive organs. These cramps begin early in the menstrual cycle, last much longer and are much worse. This experience is not considered common.

All of the activity of menstruation takes place in a hollow, pear-shaped organ called the uterus. Did you know that the uterus is actually a muscle? The uterus is the strongest muscle in the body by weight. It has multiple layers of muscle tissue that run in every direction and spiral together and, of course, are super strong. Stop and think for a moment about the type of pressure the uterus has to exert in order to push a baby out of the human body. It is the strongest force exerted by any muscle in the body. So raise your hand if you have a new profound respect for the uterus!

I'm jumping in here. I noticed during the editing process that the next section is a little louder and I don't know why. I'm really good at aromatherapy, but technology eludes me. Just know that it may get loud after this.

Let's see what happens each month with this miracle muscle. Every month the muscle builds up in preparation for pregnancy. The lining is called the *endometrium*. After ovulation, if the egg hasn't been fertilized and there is no pregnancy, then the lining isn't needed any longer and the body gets rid of it. It is the body getting rid of it that is "menstruation".

What happens is, women have in our brains, estrogen and progesterone. Those levels decline causing the lining of the uterus to break down and shed as the "menstrual flow". The lining will be replaced next month by a brand new lining, and on it goes every 28 to 30 days.

The actual cramping is caused by two actions in the body. One is that the woman's brain releases a chemical called *prostaglandin* which causes the muscles of the uterus to contract so that it restricts the blood supply to the lining (sounds kind of mean, doesn't it?). It's designed to kill the lining by constricting the blood supply. So you've got that contraction. After the death of the tissue, the uterus continues to contract so that it squeezes out the old endometrial tissue through the cervix and out of the body. And—WaLa! There is the miracle of menstruation. There is a lot happening inside this little muscle. The two things that are happening inside the body are spasms (cramps) but there is also some inflammation happening as well to the lining, so you are going to want essential oils that will address those specific actions. You are going to want essential oils that are anti-inflammatory, that are analgesic, and especially oils that are antispasmodic. Once you understand what actions you are addressing it is so much easier to find essential oils with the correct properties.

When a woman is experiencing menstrual discomfort it is not unusual for her to feel pressure in her abdomen. Of course there is the cramping which can be mild to severe. It can also be a dull ache, like a toothache to a



really sharp pain; pain in the lower hips and thighs is not at all unusual. You can address all of those areas with your blends.

Let's move into the fun stuff! Essential oils that can help relieve some of these discomforts!

First of all, there are a lot of essential oils that will address inflammation and spasms and pain. I personally love to use any essential oils from the ester-rich chemical family because, that family, in general are all fairly anti-spasmodic. Sometimes you have to go on a case-by-case basis depending on what works best for that particular woman. Some women are just drawn to a particular oil at this time of the month and all of that has to be honored.

I'm going to share six oils that have been proven clinically or historically to help with menstrual discomfort, and that I have also had great success with using with my clients.

Bergamot: Let's start with Bergamot essential oil. I say *Berga-moh* because I learned this modality in Italy and that's how I learned to say it. Bergamot, which is *Citrus bergamia*, is a powerful anti-spasmodic essential oil. It is in the ester chemical family. It has other goodies in it besides the ester molecules, but it is really effective in reducing and eliminating menstrual cramps.

As an aside, it is also great for restless leg syndrome. I have found essential oils that are anti-spasmodic also seem to be just great for restless leg.

It is a good oil for addressing depression, anxiety, tension, and, in general, it calms the central nervous system and is a great addition to cramping blends. Very cheerful—women are already kind of moody, uncomfortable and miserable at this time of the month, so anytime you can put an essential oil in the blend that's going to brighten the mood, it's a good idea.

Lavender: A no-brainer! Lavender is one of those oils that, when in doubt, put it in! When I was in massage school, I remember my instructor saying, "When in doubt, *effleurage!*" which are those long strokes that you do when you're not sure what else to do. When in doubt, add Lavender. Unless of course the person hates it or has an allergy. With Lavender you get your anti-inflammatory properties. You get your analgesic; it's great for reducing pain. It's calming to the central nervous system so it's also great for those times when you are tense and your pain is worse. If you could just calm down and relax and relieve some of the emotional tension, the pain reduces as well.



Spikenard: This is a personal favorite. The Latin binomial is *Nardostachys jatamansi*—I know that’s quite a mouthful—but it is an exquisite root oil so it’s very earthy, very grounding, very settling for the central nervous system. It is anti-spasmodic and anti-inflammatory, and it’s also very cooling. It is super for slowing down heavy menstrual bleeding and of course it will help reduce the cramps. It’s good for any kind of muscle spasms. It’s got this quality about it that just brings about a sense of inner peace.

Roman Chamomile: Another personal favorite Roman Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*). Roman Chamomile is very high in esters and therefore, highly anti-spasmodic. It’s a costly oil but the good news is that you don’t need much. It only takes a drop or two to help the tissue start to relax and help reduce some of the pain. It’s also anti-inflammatory, very soothing to the central nervous system and smells amazing. The smell alone is enough to make you feel better. That, blended with any of the oils I’ve mentioned so far would really work. It’s just a super addition to any menstrual blend. It will help you relax and will also help you sleep if that’s been eluding you as well.

Cypress: The fifth oil I’m going to mention is Cypress. The Latin binomial for Cypress is *Cupressus sempervirens*, which I love. It means, “evergreen”. This is a tree that I came to know and love when I lived in Italy because it’s everywhere and the smell is remarkable. It is a great anti-spasmodic and is also great for swelling and varicose veins. It has an astringent action, especially if you add a little lemon oil to it. But it is also very calming and soothing and is another kind of earthy oil. If you have any kind of excess fluid, swelling or edema, Cypress would be a great oil to add to your blends as a diuretic to get rid of some of that extra fluid.

Xanthoxylum: The last oil I’m going to cover today is Xanthoxylum. The Latin binomial is *Zanthoxylum armatum*. It’s a plant that is actually in the rhododendron family. One of the things that makes Xanthoxylum so special is that it is very high in a component called “linalol”. Linalol that offers so much of the profound healing of the essential oil. It’s great for pain, inflammation, cramps and spasms, and it’s also good topically for injuries and infections and things like that. With regard to today’s topic it’s deeply calming to the central nervous system—again it’s the linalol that will do that—it’s also great as an anti-depressant, so you’ve got the mood component in there as well.

There is our group of oils to help with menstrual cramps and discomfort. We talked about Bergamot, Roman Chamomile, Cypress, Lavender, Spikenard and Xanthoxylum.

I do want to caution you against one essential oil specifically just before or during your period, and that’s Clary Sage. Clary Sage is in the ester family. Clary Sage can also be great for cramping, but it is also an emmenagogue. Any essential oil that is an emmenagogue can make menstruation heavier. If you have a



tendency for a heavy flow go easy with the Clary Sage during your period. If you find you don't have a problem with it, by all means use it because it's also an anti-spasmodic.

Now, in terms of how you would use these essential oils, I would say to make them into the topical blends that feel best. If it's for you, or your client, or for whomever you are making the blends: if cool feels good, then I would do it in a lotion because lotions are water-based and tend to be a bit more cooling. They absorb very quickly as well. I know someone who prefers heat and uses Juniper Berry: she puts it on her belly and then wraps Saran wrap around her waist to keep the heat in. If heat makes you feel good and you want to use a heating pad by all means, go ahead and do that. But I found, overall, making a topical blend with unscented lotion, adding your essential oils works mostly because it absorbs quickly and it's fast acting.

We're trying to get at something we would consider an "acute" condition—in my classroom we talk about "acute" vs. "chronic"—when something is "acute" it is usually sudden in onset and is quite painful. Cramps can be pretty "acute" and so you want to go with a higher dilution and a lighter carrier. Normally I would recommend a three to four percent dilution ratio. A one percent dilution is five to six drops in one ounce (5-6 dr: 1 oz.). If you are working with a one ounce jar, and let's say 6 drops to one ounce, doing a three percent dilution that would equal 18 drops to about 24 drops—that's combined essential oils. If you wanted to make a blend with all of the oils I mentioned today, just make sure you don't go over 24 drops in a one ounce jar.

Then, you want to rub it into the area where it feels painful or wherever there is discomfort: the back, belly, inner-thighs. That's my recommendation for topical application. I would recommend a cream or a very light oil at a three to four percent dilution and apply where you feel it's needed.

The other thing that you can do is to relax the woman who has menstrual discomfort. All of the oils that I mentioned have relaxing properties: keep them going in a diffuser, make a nasal inhaler and just breathe that during the day. Especially if a cramp starts to come on, breathing through a nasal inhaler, letting the shoulders drop and relax, focusing on the feeling good from the oils taking the attention off of the cramping. Sometimes just taking a nice, warm, relaxing bath with essential oils is very soothing. You've got heat on the belly, sometimes it feels good on the lower back—just having a bath before bed time and then using the essential oils again in maybe a mist or linen spray or in a diffuser—keeping the essential oils prevalent throughout the first couple of days of your menstrual period will help.

If you Google *menstrual cramps relief* you'll come up with a thousand natural remedies out there but here are a couple that I think are really helpful:

- Put a heating pad or hot water bottle on your lower back or abdomen is almost always going to make you feel better.



- A warm bath can help.
- Rest when you need it.
- Avoid caffeine and salt. Caffeine just agitates your central nervous system and salt is going to make you feel bloated
- Avoid smoking.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Magnesium! 250 milligrams twice a day is required to assist with the metabolism of estrogen and that can help relieve cramping.
- Taking a bath with Epsom salts, which are pretty much made of magnesium as well.
- Finally, women who exercise regularly often have less menstrual pain. Make exercise a part of your weekly routine. I can tell you that I started over a year ago exercising an hour a day and I feel like a new woman. My whole body feels really well with regular exercise. That is something I highly recommend.

So there you have it, my suggestions for relief from menstrual cramps. I hope that's helpful for you Ahsamon and for anyone else who needed the information.

Now we're going to the fun little segment I like to call *Smell My Life!*

If this is the first time you've listened to the Aromatic Wisdom podcast in the Smell My Life segment I share some way in which I used essential oils and aromatics in a real situation during the week.

This week I used essential oils in a way I've never done before. I have a massage therapy practice and I had a massage client coming. Earlier I had been cooking and I had been chopping onions with no gloves—usually I wear gloves if I'm going to be chopping onions and then doing massage later; but I didn't! I thought enough time had passed but when it came time to do the massage I realized there was still a slight odor of onions on my fingers. I took some Siberian Fir, because it was there—this is not something I recommend you do a lot—but I sprinkled 2-3 drops of Siberian Fir in each of my palms and then I rubbed my fingertips through my palms, saturating my fingertips with the Siberian Fir essential oil and then rinsed my hands. Because of sensitization this isn't something you want to do frequently. To do it once is fine. Then I washed my hands again and they smelled great!

For massage therapists out there, this is something you may want to consider. To be more practical and safe, make a really strong hand lotion or even a spray diluted with Aloe Vera gel—spray that onto your hands or rub the lotion into your hands with essential oils so that your hands smell nice. I start at the head so my clients smell the essential oils coming off of my hands.



The only other thing I'd like to share before I say good-bye is to remind you that if you would like to buy Pompeii Organics essential oils you can use a code and get 15% off of your order. That code is **podcast16**, all lower case. The owner of Pompeii Organics is a graduate of my certification program and she has an amazing line of essential oils that I now use in the classroom. It is not my line, but she supports my podcasts and my students by giving this great discount. So **podcast16** gives you 15% of your entire order at www.Pompeiiorganics.com.

That's it ladies and gentleman. Please tune in next week when I'm going to be talking about children and essential oils. Until then, say it with me...

Be happy. Be well.

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