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Effects of wild yam extract on menopausal symptoms, lipids and sex hormones in healthy menopausal women

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Abstract

Objectives: Many women seek alternatives to hormonal therapies for the management of menopausal symptoms. Among the treatments currently popular are extracts of wild yam (*Dioscorea villosa*), which are applied topically in the form of a cream. These preparations are known to contain steroidal saponins, including diosgenin, which has been claimed to influence endogenous steroidogenesis. However, there have been no studies of the safety or efficacy of these preparations in the management of menopausal symptoms.

Methods: We therefore conducted a double-blind, placebo-controlled, cross-over study of the effects of a wild yam cream in 23 healthy women suffering from troublesome symptoms of the menopause. After a 4-week baseline period, each woman was given active cream and matching placebo for 3 months in random order. Diaries were completed over the baseline period and for 1 week each month thereafter, and blood and saliva samples were collected at baseline and at 3 and 6 months, for measurement of lipids and hormones.

Results: The average age of the subjects was 53.3 +/- 1.1 (SEM) years and average time since last period 4.3 +/- 0.9 years. At baseline, the average body mass index was 27.3 +/- 0.8, cholesterol level 5.7 +/- 0.2 mmol/l and follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) level 74.2 +/- 5.1 IU/l; estradiol levels were undetectable in the majority of cases. After 3 months of treatment, no significant side-effects were reported with either active treatment or placebo, and there were no changes in weight, systolic or diastolic blood pressure, or levels of total serum cholesterol, triglyceride, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, FSH, glucose, estradiol, or serum or salivary progesterone. Symptom scores showed a minor effect of both placebo and active treatment on diurnal flushing number and severity and total non-flushing symptom scores, and on nocturnal sweating after placebo, but no statistical difference between placebo and active creams.

Conclusions: This study suggests that short-term treatment with topical wild yam extract in women suffering from menopausal symptoms is free of side-effects, but appears to have little effect on menopausal symptoms. It emphasizes the importance of careful study of treatments for menopausal symptoms if women are to be adequately informed about the choices available to them.

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