

When I had my first period at the age of 13, my mother told me about what to expect. My mum herself had endometriosis, so I was told heavy bleeding and pain were part of the picture. At our place, it was considered normal to take Nurofen when you had periods. So I never questioned whether something beyond 'heavy periods' was going on.

Once an adult, I was very lucky to conceive without problems and when my children were going to primary school, I decided to retrain as a Medical Herbalist. It was during one of the case based studies on endometriosis as a part of my year 2 assignments that it finally dawned that I had a lot of the symptoms described. When I told my GP about the heavy periods with clots and iron deficiency as a result, period pain that took me out a couple of days each month, midcycle bleeds and severe PMS (I felt very guilty about how this effected the entire family) - he agreed it needed checking out.

He recommended the first step to take was a scan, which I was absolutely convinced was going to show nothing. But an ovarian cyst that looked like an endometrioma and uterine wall thickening that was consistent with adenomyosis ('endometriosis inside the uterine wall') was picked up. All of a sudden it all started to make sense. I was referred to a gynaecologist specialising in endometriosis, who recommended a D&C, investigative laparoscopy and removal of the endometrioma. He also thought I should go on the pill. I left his clinic with the promise I was going to take his information home and would get back to him with my decision.

A second and third opinion recommended options ranging from laparoscopy and a Mirena coil to hysterectomy. In the meantime, I did a lot of research and started treating myself with herbs under supervision of my mentor. I also made some lifestyle and diet changes and slowly but steadily, things started to improve.

I knew from my Mum's experience that endometrioma tend to return after surgery. I realised that a scan doesn't give a watertight diagnosis, but it was good enough for me. It all made sense and even the gynaecologist seemed to have little doubt that I have endometriosis, even without the laparoscopy. I couldn't see a reason why I would go ahead with the surgery, and my GP agreed that there was nothing wrong with doing nothing but monitoring the endometrioma.

I really didn't feel like going down the path of taking hormones either, as I understand the delicate interaction between hormones, how easily that balance is disturbed and how much is still unknown to the medical world about the working of the endocrine system. Also by that time, I had made sufficient progress with my own herbal treatment, to decide to stick to just that.

I communicated my decision to my gynaecologist who was very graceful about it, and continued to treat myself. After two years of herbal treatment, I am very happy to say that I no longer spend days in bed like I used to. Last month, my husband even commented on how he hadn't even noticed I was having my periods!

I no longer flood excessively (though periods are still on the heavy side), pain has significantly reduced (I still need the odd Nurofen), I no longer have ovarian pains, I

barely have PMS (what a relief!), I struggle less with 'foggy thinking' and bowel motions no longer cause trouble. I still have midcycle bleeds, though.

Although the endometriosis hasn't disappeared, I feel like it is no longer interfering with my life, the way it used to. For the future, I will continue to treat myself with herbs, improving my formula and finding the herbs that work best for me.

On a practical note: For those of you who consider the use of herbs for endometriosis, it is good but not vital to have a diagnosis - remember it is always good to have things checked out, if you notice something is out of the ordinary. Herbal medicines are very individual and for safety reasons (interactions with other medication or herbs that might not be suitable for your condition) as well as for herbs to be effective, I strongly recommend finding a registered herbalist (www.nzamh.org.nz) you feel comfortable with.

For more information:

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