



WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE? SUSAN CLARK



Q I have read many different health claims for something called Pycnogenol, or French pine bark extract, and wondered if you thought this was a useful supplement. What does it do?

H Foster, by e-mail

A Pycnogenol is the trademark name for an extract taken from the bark of the maritime pine, *Pinus pinaster*, which grows along the coast of southwest France. It is an important source of antioxidants, which are often incorporated into anti-ageing creams. What interests me more is that it is now attracting attention as a potentially useful natural remedy for managing the symptoms associated with Type 2 diabetes.

According to a new study, published in *Diabetes Care*, the journal of the American Diabetes Association, researchers have found that patients with mild Type 2 diabetes are better able to control blood-sugar levels when they take a daily supplement of 200mg of Pycnogenol, which does not affect insulin levels.

Diabetics have a higher risk of heart disease and obesity. Both can be caused by high blood-sugar levels, which can damage blood vessels and raise levels of bad cholesterol.

The participants in this study also followed a diet and exercise regime prescribed by the researchers, so nobody is claiming that Pycnogenol is a cure. But it does mean that it is worth more scientific investigation in the context of tackling the problems associated with diabetes.

There is also preliminary evidence that Pycnogenol may work to stimulate the immune system and that, as an antioxidant, it can help protect DNA from damage by free radicals. So yes, this is a very useful agent, whether you are diabetic, or concerned about heart disease or ageing — and one that I think we will be hearing a lot more about over the next few years.

Pycnogenol is widely available, but you can also order it from Viridian (01327 878050; £24 for 60 capsules).

Q I blush easily when I am embarrassed, and it is even worse if I have had just one alcoholic drink. It is really starting to affect my social life. Is there anything that can help?

S Cooper, Dunbar

A Facial flushing, especially if you drink even a small amount of alcohol, is often a sign of a common, but not very well understood, skin problem called acne rosacea. As you tend to blush only when embarrassed, I am not suggesting this is what you are suffering from, but anyone for whom flushing is a problem should check my website (see below) for information on rosacea and the natural remedies that can help manage the symptoms.

If your blushing is a result of shyness only, then you would benefit from a homeopathic remedy *pulsatilla* (£5 for 50 tablets, from Ainsworths; 020 7935 5330). This is a handy remedy to keep in your bag to take as and when you think you need it. A better long-term solution, however, would be to consult a qualified homeopath, who can make a constitutional remedy, based on your personality, outlook and medical history. To find someone in your area, contact the Society of Homeopaths on 01604 817890.

Q I suffer badly from haemorrhoids. They burn and itch, but I am not sure which natural remedies work best for this condition.

Name and address withheld

A Haemorrhoids are swollen veins, located around the anus and along the lowest portion of the colon. Those located externally are also known as piles and, while no other animal suffers from them,

an estimated 75% of all adults in the western world will experience this problem at some time in their lives. The herb you need to investigate, to help relieve the associated itching and burning sensations, is butcher's broom, *Ruscus aculeatus*, so called because it was the plant of choice for the straw used in the brooms traditionally favoured by butchers.

Supplements are made from the root and rhizome of this Mediterranean evergreen bush, and the active agent, currently being researched for its effectiveness against haemorrhoids, is the chemical ruscogenin. This has anti-inflammatory properties and can help prevent the swelling of smaller blood vessels.

Hemaron is a new supplement from Nutrica, designed specifically to tackle this common problem. It provides a therapeutic dose of 100mg of butcher's broom per capsule. Each tablet also contains horse chestnut, which has a proven track record in supporting and strengthening blood vessels, plus a newer agent extracted from *Sophora japonica*, commonly known as the Japanese pagoda tree.

You can order it from Victoria Health (0800 413596; £19.95 for 120 capsules). To start, you will need to take three capsules three times a day. When the problem clears, cut back to a maintenance dose of just one capsule, three times a day.

For more information on natural health, visit my website: www.whatreallyworks.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 provide replies only 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

