



Treatment for premenstrual syndrome with Vitex agnus castus: A prospective, randomized, multi-center placebo controlled study in China

Zhong He^a, Rong Chen^a, Yingfang Zhou^b, Li Geng^c, Zhenyu Zhang^d, Shuling Chen^b, Yanjun Yao^c, Junli Lu^d, Shouqing Lin^{a,*}

^a Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Peking Union Medical College, Chinese Academy of Medical Science, Beijing, PR China

^b Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Peking University First Hospital, Beijing, PR China

^c Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Peking University Third Hospital, Beijing, PR China

^d Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Beijing Chaoyang Hospital, Affiliated to Capital Medical University, Beijing, PR China

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To investigate the efficacy and safety of VAC BNO 1095 extract in Chinese women suffering from moderate to severe premenstrual syndrome (PMS).

Methods: Prospective, double-blind, placebo controlled, parallel-group, multi-center clinical trial design was employed. After screening and preparation phase lasting three cycles, Eligible patients were randomly assigned into treatment or placebo groups and had treatment with VAC extract or placebo for up to three cycles. Efficacy was assessed using the Chinese version PMS-diary (PMSD) and PMTS.

Results: Two hundred and seventeen women were eligible to enter the treatment phase (TP) and were randomly assigned into the treatment group (108) or the placebo group (109), 208 provided the efficacy data (treatment 104, placebo 104), and 202 completed the treatment phase (treatment 101, placebo 101). The mean total PMSD score decreased from 29.23 at baseline (0 cycle) to 6.41 at the termination (3rd cycle) for the treatment group and from 28.14 at baseline (0 cycle) to 12.64 at the termination (3rd cycle) for the placebo group. The total PMSD score of 3rd cycle was significantly lower than the baseline in both groups ($p < 0.0001$). The difference in the mean scores from the baseline to the 3rd cycle in the treatment group (22.71 ± 10.33) was significantly lower than the difference in the placebo group (15.50 ± 12.94 , $p < 0.0001$). Results of PMTS were similar, the total scores for PMTS were significantly lower between the two groups ($p < 0.01$) and within each group ($p < 0.01$). The score was decreased from 26.17 ± 4.79 to 9.92 ± 9.01 for the treatment group, and from 27.10 ± 4.76 to 14.59 ± 10.69 for the placebo group. A placebo effect of 50% was found in the present study. No serious adverse event (SAE) occurred in both groups.

Conclusion: Vitex agnus castus (VAC BNO 1095 corresponding to 40 mg herbal drug) is a safe, well tolerated and effective drug of the treatment for Chinese women with the moderate to severe PMS.

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1. Introduction

Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) was first described by Frank as the premenstrual tension syndrome 70 years ago [1]. It is a set of physical, emotional and behavioral symptoms during the week preceding menstruation that are alleviated when the menstrual flow begins [2].

More than 80% of women experienced one of the premenstrual symptoms as defined by ICD-10 criteria [3] and the prevalence of severe and moderate PMS which need to be treated are around 8–30% in different ethnic groups. Approximately 5% of North American women consider their symptoms to be severe enough to have a

substantially negative impact on their health and social well being [4–7].

During the past several decades, investigators have contributed to clarifying the pattern of symptom experience across the menstrual cycle by charting how the severity of symptoms waxes and wanes. Symptoms vary among different individuals in the women studied [8]. Typical symptoms are performance impairment, easy fatigue, tenderness and fullness of breasts, change in appetite, abdominal bloating, swelling of extremities, chest pain, itching, backache and others. Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) described as severe PMS is characterized by depression or aggression, expressed irritability, unstable nervous system, and performance impairment during the last week of the luteal phase [9].

PMS was associated with reduction in health-related QOL and work productivity [10]. The impacts of PMS also include direct and indirect economic consequences because of significantly reduced productivity at work and increased healthcare costs [11].

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 10 88068846.

E-mail addresses: hezhang@pumc.edu.cn, hezhang08@hotmail.com (Z. He), shouqing.lin@yahoo.com.cn (S. Lin).

The etiology of PMS remains unknown and may be complex and multifactorial. The role of ovarian hormones is unclear, but symptoms often improve when ovulation is suppressed [12]. Studies attempting to attribute the disorder to an excess of estrogen, a deficit of progesterone, a withdrawal of estrogen, or changes in estrogen-to-progesterone ratio have been unable to find the disorder. The current consensus seems to be that normal ovarian function rather than hormone imbalance is the cyclical trigger for PMDD-related biochemical events within the central nervous system and other target tissues [13].

Therapeutic interventions for PMS range from conservative (lifestyle and stress management) to treatment with psychotropic medications and hormonal therapy or surgical procedures to eliminate ovulation or ovarian function. While all of these treatments are successful in relieving symptoms for some of the women treated, to date no one intervention has proven to be effective for all [13].

As one of the traditional therapeutic interventions, extracts from the fruit of *Vitex agnus castus* (VAC) chaste tree are the longest used and best investigated phytotherapeutics for PMS. For the VAC BNO 1095 extract, dopaminergic effects have been proven in animal and clinical trials [14,15]. Bicyclic diterpenes isolated from VAC BNO 1095 extract have dopaminergic activity. Additionally, unknown substances have affinity to opioid receptors [16,17]. Several placebo controlled clinical trials have been done to test the efficacy and the side effects of VAC extract. These studies confirmed that VAC relieves symptoms of PMS successfully without notable side effects [15,18–20]. However, all of these studies were done in western people. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the efficacy and safety of VAC BNO 1095 extract in Chinese women suffering from moderate to severe PMS.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting

The study was completed from February 2005 to January 2007 in four centers in Beijing, China. The clinical trial was approved by the State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA). The study protocol and patients' informed consent form were approved by the ethics committee of Peking Union Medical College Hospital.

2.2. Study design

The prospective, double-blind, placebo controlled, parallel-group, multi-center clinical trial design was employed in this study. Based on the results of previous studies, the treatment effect could be shown with the sample size at $\alpha=0.05$ and with a statistical power of 80%. The sample size is at least 100 subjects in each group. As the anticipated drop-out rate was about 20%, the enrollment of 120 subjects was recommended with 30 per group in each center.

2.3. Data collection instruments

Premenstrual syndrome diary (PMSD), a self-assessment symptom rating scale, was used to monitor and diagnosis both moderate to severe PMS. The PMSD is a concise questionnaire consisting of 17 items with factor scales measuring negative affect, water retention, food and pain. It has been used in studies of European women with moderated symptoms of PMS [21]. It is a single page questionnaire using a 4-point rating scale from absent (0) to severe (3). Although there are four factor scales, only the total scale was used in the present study. The main efficacy of the treatment in the present study was the PMSD total scores of the last 7 days prior to menses, which were considered as the luteal phase scores. Reliability of the Chinese version of the PMSD was tested among 50 subjects in the

pilot study during two cycles before the study started. The Cronbach's Alpha of PMSD in follicular phase and luteal phase were 0.88 and 0.92, respectively. Test and retest reliability of the Chinese version of the PMSD was tested in both of the follicular phase and the luteal phase were test also. The correlation of luteal phase was 0.5 ($p < 0.01$) and it was 0.42 ($p < 0.01$) in the follicular phase.

The Premenstrual Tension Syndrome Self-Rating Scale (PMTS) [22], is a 36-item questionnaire comprised of the core PMS symptoms in ten different domains with the answer of 'yes' (1) or 'no' (0). PMTS is a self-assessment tool. Cronbach's alpha of PMST in the previous study was 0.93 [22]. Cronbach's alpha of Chinese version PMST in the present study was 0.77. The test and retest reliability was 0.64.

The instruments listed above are English versions. A translation and back translation process was employed in the pilot study. A group of experts from the mental health and gynecological field made the final decision on the Chinese version after a formal discussion and the test of reliability.

A screening questionnaire (SQ) including 11 items was developed by the group of researchers based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition [9]. The answer was 'yes' or 'no'. It was used to screen potential PMS patients in the present study.

2.4. Data collecting procedure

The study consisted of three phases including the screening phase, the preparation phase and the treatment phase. Written Informed consent was obtained at the screening phase (SP) which was on any day of the first SP cycle (–2) except menstruation. The gynecologists of each center screened for the potential PMS by using the SQ. If the first 4 items had at least 1 'yes' answer and the all 11 items had at least 4 'yes' answers, the woman would be considered as a potential subject. Potential subjects were given the PMSD for two cycles. Demographic data were also obtained at the screening phase. The preparation phase lasted two cycles (–1 and 0) and had two scheduled visits (1st and 2nd). It was used to determine the eligibility. The potential subject would be diagnosed as having the moderate to severe PMS if the average of her total PMSD scores during the last 7 days prior to menstruation in both cycles revealed an increase of at least 16 points as compared to the average total score of the preceding follicular phase (cycle days 3–9). At the 2nd visit of SP, the diagnosis of PMS was confirmed. The treatment phase (TH) included 3 menstrual cycles (1, 2, and 3) and consisted of 3 scheduled visits (3rd, 4th and 5th visit). All visits were between the first to 3rd day of the menstrual cycle 1st, 2nd and 3rd. The PMSD, BBT chart and study drug or the placebo for one menstrual cycle were presented to the subjects by a trained research assistant in each center. At the same time all records for the last cycle were collected and checked. The PMTS score was also obtained. All changes in subjects' condition during the treatment phase were recorded on the condition changes form (CRF) and medical documents. Scheduled telephone contact with each subject was used to estimate the start of the 2nd and 3rd cycle. The study termination visit was scheduled for the first 10 days of the first post-study cycle.

2.5. Subject

Potential subjects were recruited by advertisements, in hospital newsletters, physician referral, and word of mouth. Prescreening conducted by a trained assistant reviewed the subjects' willingness to comply with the study design and retrospectively assess the severity of PMS by using the screening questionnaire. All participants provided written informed consent. The inclusion criteria were healthy women between 18 and 45 years of age; had regular menstruation in last 12 months: 22–35 days; the total score of

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