



[WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?]

JENNIFER HARPER-DEACON

Q I have unsightly thread veins at the backs of my legs, above the ankles. Can you suggest a natural alternative to laser treatment? I have heard that extract of horse chestnut, in tablet or gel form, may help. What do you suggest?
Kay Adams, Leeds

A Constipation and a sluggish lymphatic system are thought to contribute greatly to this problem, so diet plays an important part. Increase your intake of fibre-rich foods such as vegetables, fruit containing bioflavonoids, and cereals, including whole-grain rice (don't go too heavy on wheat, as it can be an irritant); and make sure you drink lots of water.

The astringent herb horse chestnut (*aesculus*) has been used to great effect since the 18th century and is one of the most widely prescribed herbs in Germany. It has several important therapeutic constituents, including aescin, which has a toning effect on the walls of the blood vessels. It is also an anti-oedema, which means it reduces the amount of excess fluid in body tissue, and an anti-inflammatory. Try A Vogel Aesculus Forte tincture tablets (£8.99 for 30; 01294 277344); take one twice a day after food. Use it in conjunction with A Vogel Aesculus gel (£8.95), which can be applied topically to the affected area.

Improving circulation is important, too, so exercise that supports the veins and stimulates blood flow, such as swimming and power walking, is recommended. In the evening, try a naturopathic technique for this problem by applying cold water to your feet, calves and the backs of the legs.

Q I was quite alarmed to hear that candles can release toxic fumes. Are there any that are safe and natural?

Janet Reece, Brighton

A There is growing public concern over reports of carcinogens and damage to the lungs from black soot from paraffin-based and artificially scented candles, which account for almost all of the candles sold in the UK.

There are alternatives, however. Timothy Han's candles (£28; www.timothyhan.com) are all-natural, made using the finest plant-based ingredients and biodegradable soy wax. They are also produced in a sustainable and ethically and environmentally friendly manner.

Natural Magic (£35; 0870 460 4677, www.naturalmagicuk.com) is another wonderful range, containing 100% organic ingredients. These aromatherapy candles are made from organic vegetable waxes, a healthy alternative to burning paraffin-based candles. They are non-toxic and burn cleanly without emitting soot.

Both of these ranges are free from GM materials, herbicides and pesticides, have wicks of metal-free, unbleached cotton and come in a variety of absolutely delicious and healing fragrances.

Q I recently read a worrying story in the news about certain Chinese medicines containing poisons such as mercury and arsenic. How do we know which Chinese herbs are safe to take?

Name and address withheld

A Traditional Chinese medicine has been practised for thousands of years. Small amounts of toxic compounds containing arsenic and mercury were once incorporated into certain formulas: for example, mercury sulphide is found in the medicinal zhu sha, or cinnabar. But these formulas are no longer used by any herbalist registered in the UK. Another problem is that pollution can cause

heavy-metal contamination, and that is why it is important for the public to obtain herbs from practitioners who use reputable suppliers.

The Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine (RCHM) adheres to UK law and ensures that all its members are fully trained and follow recognised codes of practice. Indeed, its own code of practice states that all herbal products must be clearly labelled in English, listing all the ingredients, with an expiry date and a batch number.

The RCHM has always condemned the use of traditional remedies that contain dangerous ingredients such as mercury, as well as the illegal trade in endangered plant and animal species. It advises patients to consult a practitioner, rather than self-medicate. The RCHM also keeps up to date with safety recalls and can advise anyone who is worried about identifying products they may have taken. For further information, call 01603 623994, or visit www.rchm.co.uk.

Jennifer Harper-Deacon is a registered naturopathic physician. For more information, visit www.jenniferharper-deacon.com

If you have any questions, write to What's the Alternative? Style, The Sunday Times, 1 Pennington Street, London E98 1ST. We can only provide replies to published letters

Before following any recommendation in this column, it is important to consult your GP if you suffer from any health problem or special condition, or are in doubt as to its suitability