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Herbal Love Potions with Proof to Back Them Up

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Countless “natural love potions” purportedly provide a boost in the bedroom, online ads proclaim. But many of them are bunk...because if you dig deeper, you’ll find that only a few herbal sex enhancers are backed up with scientific evidence of effectiveness.

Naturopathic physician Laurie Steelsmith, ND, LAc, coauthor of the upcoming *[Great Sex. Naturally: Every Woman’s Guide to Enhancing Her Sexuality Through the Secrets of Natural Medicine](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1401931464/bottlinepubl-20)* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1401931464/bottlinepubl-20>), says that, fortunately, the few proven herbal remedies address three of the most common sex complaints among midlife and senior adults—low libido, erectile problems and antidepressant-induced sexual dysfunction.

The following herbal products are sold over the counter in health-food stores and online. However, before you try them, Dr. Steelsmith recommended seeing a licensed naturopathic physician to discuss your health history (because treating an underlying medical disorder could solve the sex problem)...to ensure that the herbs are safe and appropriate for you (because they can cause side effects and/or interact with certain medications)...and to get specific dosage instructions. For a referral, visit the Web site of the [American Association of Naturopathic Physicians](http://www.naturopathic.org/) (<http://www.naturopathic.org/>). *Here’s how herbs can help with...*

Low libido. “Not tonight, dear, I have a headache,” is a classic punch line—but loss of libido is no joke, especially considering how common it is. In a recent AARP survey of adults ages 45 and older, only a scant 6% of female respondents said that they had a higher-than-average level of sexual desire, while a whopping 40% of women said that they had a lower-than-average libido.

Studies involving postmenopausal women show that *Panax ginseng* (also called Korean or Asian ginseng) can improve arousal, possibly due to its relaxing effects on clitoral and vaginal muscles. “Ginseng modulates the nervous system, boosting sexual energy if you’re lethargic and helping you relax when stress dampens your libido,” Dr. Steelsmith said. An alternative she recommended is the brand-name product ArginMax for Women (<http://www.arginmax.com/>), which contains ginseng plus the herb ginkgo biloba and the amino acid L-arginine (both of which promote circulation) and vitamins and minerals (for general wellness). Dr. Steelsmith generally advises her patients to try ginseng or ArginMax for three months to see whether it helps restore libido...if so, it can be used as long as desired. *Caution:* Side effects may include diarrhea, restlessness, vertigo, breast pain and/or menstrual changes. Avoid ginseng if you have hot flashes, insomnia, dry mouth, dry skin, high blood pressure, a heart rhythm disorder or a bleeding disorder—it could exacerbate symptoms.

Erectile dysfunction (ED). OK, so this is a guy’s problem—but that makes it a problem for women, too. In the AARP survey, erectile problems were reported by 13% of men in their 40s...18% in their 50s...38% in their 60s...and 56% in their 70s or beyond.

Encourage your partner to talk to his doctor about *yohimbine*, the active ingredient in the extract of the bark of the yohimbe tree. Studies show that it helps ED by increasing blood flow to the penis and stimulating the central nervous system and genital nerves. Generally it is taken daily (not just prior to sex the way an ED drug would be used), continuing indefinitely. *Caution:* Do not exceed the dosage recommend by a doctor or listed on the product label. Yohimbine may cause restlessness, irritability or other side effects. Yohimbe should not be used by men who take MAO inhibitors or blood thinners or who have cardiovascular disease, blood pressure problems or seizure disorders, Dr. Steelsmith said.

Antidepressant-induced sexual dysfunction. Among AARP survey respondents, 16% of women and 10% of men were taking antidepressant medication. For both women and men, these drugs are notorious for causing sexual side effects—decreased genital sensation, low libido, erectile problems and/or difficulty reaching orgasm.

The herb ginkgo can help counter such side effects. It has demonstrated positive effects on all four phases of the sexual response cycle—desire...arousal (lubrication in women and erection in men)...orgasm...and resolution (afterglow). For patients on antidepressants, Dr. Steelsmith usually advises daily use of a ginkgo extract labeled “standardized to 24% of ginkgo flavone glycosides,” continuing for as long as a patient is on antidepressant medication. Ginkgo generally is well-tolerated, though occasionally it may cause stomach upset, headache or restlessness. *Caution:* Because it may increase bleeding risk, ginkgo should not be used by patients who take a blood thinner, are anticipating surgery or are pregnant.

Source: Laurie Steelsmith, ND, LAc, is coauthor with her husband, Alex Steelsmith, of the upcoming [Great Sex, Naturally: Every Woman's Guide to Enhancing Her Sexuality Through the Secrets of Natural Medicine](#) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1401931464/bottlinepubl-20>) and author of [Natural Choices for Women's Health: How the Secrets of Natural and Chinese Medicine Can Create a Lifetime of Wellness](#) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/140004796X/bottlinepubl-20>). Dr. Steelsmith maintains a private practice in naturopathic and Chinese medicine in Honolulu. [NaturalChoicesForWomen.com](http://www.NaturalChoicesForWomen.com) (<http://www.NaturalChoicesForWomen.com>)

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