

[Lydia Estes Pinkham \(1819–1883\)](#) ^[1]

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Lydia Estes Pinkham invented and sold Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, a medicinal tonic used to treat menstrual discomfort and promote female reproductive health in general, in the US during the nineteenth century. Pinkham also founded Mrs. Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company, a business that sold natural remedies for women's health issues. Throughout her life, Pinkham acted as an authority on female wellness, writing medical pamphlets about female anatomy and reproductive processes. In those pamphlets, Pinkham addressed female medical issues that physicians did not frequently discuss with their patients. Pinkham's advertising techniques and her products helped women learn about their reproductive anatomy and processes and helped ease [menstruation](#) ^[4].

Pinkham was born on 9 February 1819 in Lynn, Massachusetts, to Rebecca Chase and William Estes. Her family identified as Quaker throughout her youth, and although slavery was legal in the United States, Pinkham's family supported anti-slavery and abolitionist organizations. According to Pinkham scholar Sarah Stage, Pinkham consistently supported women's rights and anti-slavery issues. At sixteen, Pinkham joined the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society, an abolitionist [organization](#) ^[5] for women. She also maintained a friendship with Fredrick Douglass, a former slave. As a young woman, Pinkham worked as a nurse, teacher, and midwife.

In September of 1843, Pinkham married Isaac Pinkham, a man who worked as a shoemaker, a real estate agent, and a kerosene manufacturer. Together, they had four children. Pinkham's first son, Charles, was born in 1844 and her son Daniel followed. Her third son, William, was born in 1852 and her daughter Aroline was born in 1857.

During the mid 1800s, Pinkham began experimenting with herbal remedies for common health complaints. Pinkham kept a detailed notebook, which she labeled "Medical Directions for Ailments," in which she recorded folk recipes and observations of what compounds and natural ingredients treated what ailments. By the 1870s, Pinkham had created a vegetable compound in her home kitchen and began distributing it to friends and neighbors. The concoction was a brown, bitter tasting mixture comprised of black cohosh, life root, unicorn root, pleurisy root, and fenugreek seed. The compound's ingredients grew wildly in North America. Pinkham bottled her compound in a fifteen percent alcohol solution to preserve the natural ingredients. Pinkham claimed the compound treated women's menstrual cramps, various reproductive disorders, and symptoms of menopause including hot flashes and depression. Users of Pinkham's compound testified that it relieved conditions they were too embarrassed to report to their physicians.

During the 1870s, while Pinkham was experimenting with her herbal remedies, the Pinkham family struggled with their finances. In 1875, during the nation's financial depression, the family went bankrupt. During that same year, Pinkham founded Mrs. Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Company to market her product, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, as an herbal treatment for female medical problems. In 1875, her husband's real estate business plummeted as a result of the economic depression, and he was arrested for unpaid debt. Following his release, Pinkham's husband became ill and spent much of his time in bed.

Meanwhile, Pinkham transformed her basement into a factory and began mass-producing her compound. Her eldest son and daughter provided the funds for the bottling and labeling supplies, and her other two sons sold the product. Pinkham's husband had no recorded role in his wife's business. In 1876, after finding success in the market for herbal remedies, Pinkham filed and received a patent for her vegetable compound with the US Patent Office, then headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, to guarantee her family control over her herbal remedy recipe for the following fifty years. Their product was successful, and Pinkham's family received offers from those interested in buying the business, which they turned down.

After experimenting with door to door sales during the mid to late 1870s, Pinkham discovered that newspaper advertisements reached a wider audience of women seeking a remedy for what Pinkham described in her pamphlets and product packaging as feminine discomfort. In 1879, Pinkham posed for a photograph that was used on the label of her bottled products. According to Stage, including Pinkham's image on the products dramatically increased sales of Pinkham's products because it showed that the creator of the herbal remedy was a sympathetic and compassionate woman who personally understood the pains and discomfort of women. According to biographer Doris Weatherford, Pinkham's image softened the blunt descriptions of gynecological problems contained in her pamphlets. Such marketing tactics were aimed directly at women. According to Stage, six months after including her image on packaging and advertisements, Pinkham had become a national figure and editors often used Pinkham's photograph when they needed a photograph of a famous woman, such as Queen Victoria. Sales drastically increased and the family turned down an offer of \$100,000 for their business and trademark.

After her products had become more popular in the late 1870s, Pinkham added a Department of Advice to her company, for which women could write in about concerns they had about their bodies and receive answers. Pinkham advised hundreds of women who wrote to her, many of whom knew little about their bodily functions and anatomy. Pinkham published some of the

inquiries and responses in what she called "Pinkham Pamphlets." Pinkham guaranteed that no male would ever read the contents of the letters, encouraging women to ask questions they may otherwise have deemed uncomfortable. The staff at Pinkham's medical company continued to publish pamphlets and answer questions after Pinkham's death.

In her pamphlets, Pinkham often offered advice that disagreed with medical advice women received from their physicians. For example, during the 1870s, physicians routinely treated severe menstrual cramps by removing the ovaries, a dangerous medical procedure that had a 40 percent mortality rate. According to Weatherford, physicians in the 1800s routinely prescribed dangerous chemicals to patients, such as mercury or lead, and performed unnecessary surgical procedures. Though Pinkham was not a licensed physician, she recommended rest, a healthy balanced diet, and good hygiene to women with menstrual cramps, rather than traditional medical treatments.

In 1881, Pinkham left her work when her two older sons were diagnosed with tuberculosis. Both sons died shortly after. A year later, in 1882, Pinkham died from a stroke at age sixty-four. At the time of her death, her company earned \$300,000 annually. Her surviving daughter and son assumed responsibility of the company and continued to grow the business. By 1898, Pinkham's vegetable compound had become one of the most extensively advertised medical products in the US, and by 1925, her business's annual profits peaked at \$3.8 million.

Sources

1. [Harvard University](#)^[6] Library Open Collections Program: Women Working, 1800-1930. "Lydia Estes Pinkham (1819–1883)." [Harvard University](#)^[6] Library. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/www/pinkham.html>^[7] (Accessed February 16, 2017).
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