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MENOPAUSE & NATURAL MEDICINE

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald

Our population is clearly shifting. By the year 2015, 50% of women will be post menopausal. In fact, with the prolongation of life expectancy, today's average woman can expect to live at least one-third of her life in the post-menopausal phase. It is essential that women make informed decisions about the "treatment" of menopause. More women are investigating the options available to help them make this transition with ease and to help ensure their long term health. There are many safe, natural medicines available to assist them before, during and after menopause. Menopause is a natural transformation, not a disease requiring pharmacological treatment in all cases.

Menopause refers to the cessation of menses which occurs on average at the age of 50. While this is a normal, natural process, it is often associated with physical and mental symptoms that range from being uncomfortable to debilitating. Symptoms sometimes associated with menopause are hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, irritability, anxiety, depression, vaginal dryness, urinary problems, skin dryness, palpitations, nausea, back pain, leg pain, and irregular menstrual bleeding. After menopause, women are also at higher risk for developing osteoporosis and heart disease.

Current medical treatment primarily involves the use of hormone replacement therapy, which calls for taking a combination of synthetic estrogen and progesterone. Hormone replacement therapy is necessary or appropriate in some people, particularly when a woman has had a complete hysterectomy or is at high risk for osteoporosis for some other reason, for instance the long term use of corticosteroids. However, many women are uncomfortable with the side effects of hormone replacement therapy and the known and unknown risks associated with it. It is reported that of the women who choose hormone replacement therapy one third stop within nine months and more than half quit within a year due to undesirable side effects. Estrogen therapy can cause numerous side effects including vaginal yeast infections, breast tenderness, nausea, cramps, bloating, headaches, changes in weight, depression and mood changes. In addition a recent study reports a 2.5 fold increase in the risk of surgically confirmed gall bladder disease in women receiving post menopausal estrogen. Other studies show a significantly increased risk of breast cancer after 5 years use of HRT. Without information about other alternatives, many women suffer needlessly with uncomfortable symptoms. Others elect to pursue natural options for managing their symptoms and maximizing their long term health potential.

In naturopathic medicine, the goal is to provide natural solutions to women's menopausal symptoms and provide guidelines that will enable women not to just survive menopause, but to flourish through and beyond it. Many of the health conditions that afflict post-menopausal women are preventable through proper diet, exercise and lifestyle. The approach is to do a thorough assessment of each individual woman, to determine the degree of her discomfort,

and to assess whether she is at a high, medium or low risk for osteoporosis, heart disease and other conditions. Management and treatment options vary depending on the risks for these diseases and include diet, exercise, vitamins and minerals, and herbal medicines.

Drugs are not the only source of estrogen outside the body. Estrogenic compounds are abundant in the plant world and in fact are usually ingested as part of the diet. Soybeans have gentle estrogenic activity to help reduce hot flashes, vaginal dryness and they have also shown to be protective against breast cancer and osteoporosis. One and a half cups of soybeans provides about .675 mg of estrogens, more than the average dose of premarin (synthetic estrogen). Herbs also have estrogenic effects and have been used for thousands of years to help balance the female hormonal cycle. Licorice (*glycyrrhiza glabra*) has mild estrogenic effects and helps to support the adrenal glands, immune system and liver. Dong quai (*angelica sinensis*) is the second most popular herb in Asia, next to ginseng. It is very effective for reducing hot flashes due to its mild estrogenic effects and its ability to stabilize blood vessels. Motherwort is a menopause tonic and as its Latin name, *Leonurus cardiaca* implies, it is also a heart tonic, often used to lower blood pressure. Vitamin E has been shown to reduce hot flashes and vaginal dryness in several placebo controlled studies. When we consider that vitamin E is also a potent antioxidant and protects against heart disease, it is an essential ingredient for women going through menopause.

It is important to keep in mind that other factors may also contribute to physical changes at menopause. The thyroid gland in the neck that regulates metabolism can become less active causing fatigue, weight gain, coldness and other symptoms. If during the perimenopausal period a woman has experienced heavier menstrual bleeding, anemia can result and cause fatigue as well. Standard blood tests often miss both low thyroid and iron deficiency anemia, so it is important to have a thorough health assessment by a naturopathic physician or holistically trained M.D. to help you make the right choices for your unique situation.

The menopausal years can be a time of transformation and empowerment for women. With the right plan for exercise, diet and herbal medicine, most women can make the second half of their life the better half. Remember, they're not hot flashes, they are power surges!

Recommended Reading: Menopause: A Naturopathic Approach to the Transitional Years
By Dr. Karen Jensen, ND
Prentice-Hall Canada

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