

Natural Therapy for Menopause

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There are nearly 20 million women in the United States experiencing menopause at present. It is estimated this number will grow to 60 million by the year 2010.(1) Menopausal women are faced with a variety of symptoms and the difficult decision of whether to undergo Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) with its unhealthy side-effects. What many woman don't know is that there are effective alternative therapies—not only to decrease symptoms of menopause, but also to reduce the associated risks of coronary artery disease and osteoporosis. Natural therapy focuses on symptom relief and disease prevention by adjusting diet and using nutritional supplements and herbs.

Many women begin experiencing menopause at around age 45 as the body begins adjusting to erratic hormone levels. Irregular menstrual periods and hot flashes characterize Perimenopause, or the time leading up to menopause. Although the ovaries will continue to secrete estrogen and progesterone during this time, the availability of these hormones becomes increasingly dependent on fat tissue and the adrenal glands.

Menopause is defined by the loss of ovarian function with the actual cessation of menses, and occurs in most women by age 51. Symptoms of menopause include emotional lability, decreased vaginal lubrication, hot flashes or night sweats (in 80% of women), and depression.

Signs and Symptoms of Menopause

- ?? Insomnia
- ?? Loss of libido (due to low testosterone)
- ?? Irregular or absent menstrual periods
- ?? Elevated FSH and LH levels
- ?? Hot flashes/flushes or night sweats
- ?? Decreased vaginal lubrication and thinning of vaginal mucosa that may cause painful intercourse
- ?? Depression
- ?? Forgetfulness
- ?? Mood swings
- ?? Urinary incontinence

Women experiencing climacteric will also have decreased levels of testosterone production, both from the ovaries and the adrenal glands. This is likely responsible for the diminished libido experienced by many post-menopausal women. “Adrenopause” is the term given to the inability of the adrenal glands to produce androgens like DHEA and testosterone.

The decline in circulating estrogen will almost certainly result in at least some of the symptoms listed above, but more importantly, may also contribute to disease. This is particularly true for women who already have an increased risk because of heredity or poor lifestyle choices. The two most significant diseases associated with climacteric are osteoporosis

and heart disease. Both of these diseases are strongly associated with declining estrogen levels. Listed below are some of the factors that contribute to osteoporosis and heart disease.

Risk Factors Associated with Cardiovascular Disease and Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis

- ?? Heredity
- ?? Small frame/thin
- ?? Smoking
- ?? Physical Inactivity
- ?? Reduced estrogen
- ?? Corticosteroid/anticonvulsant use
- ?? Inadequate calcium and vitamin D

Cardiovascular Disease

- ?? Smoking
- ?? High LDL
- ?? Low HDL
- ?? Obesity
- ?? Diabetes
- ?? Stress
- ?? High blood pressure
- ?? Reduced estrogen
- ?? Elevated triglycerides
- ?? Elevated homocysteine levels

Estrogen plays an important role in bone metabolism by decreasing the rate of bone demineralization or “resorption”. Bone naturally undergoes reconstruction and is continually broken down and replaced by new minerals and proteins. As estrogen levels decline, the rate of resorption exceeds that of replacement, the bone weakens, and the risk of fractures increases.

The decline in estrogen levels that accompany menopause is associated with an increase in heart disease due to an increase in total cholesterol, LDL’s, and triglycerides, while HDL, or “good” cholesterol, may be diminished due to the relative increase in testosterone levels. Unopposed estrogen therapy has been shown to reverse these blood lipid changes. In 15 out of 19 studies, estrogen use reduced the frequency of myocardial infarction or ischemic heart disease by about half. However, unopposed estrogen therapy has been associated with increased rate of endometrial and breast cancer. This danger can be lessened by combining estrogen with progestin, however, the cardio-protective effect of combined HRT may be diminished.(2) What follows are the risks, as well as benefits of estrogen and progesterone replacement therapy:

Estrogen Replacement

Benefits

- ?? Dec. hot flashes
- ?? dec. vaginal soreness
- ?? dec. osteoporosis
- ?? improved mood

Side-effects

- ?? Endometrial Cancer
- ?? monthly periods continue
- ?? liver disease
- ?? 2x increase in gall bladder disease
- ?? depression
- ?? uterine fibroids
- ?? high blood pressure
- ?? breast cancer
- ?? increased doctor visits

Progesterone Replacement

Benefits

- ?? dec. risk uterine cancer

Side-effects

- ?? unfavorably alters blood fats
- ?? implicated in high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease
- ?? breast cancer
- ?? mood changes

As indicated, there are many risk factors associated with taking hormones, the most significant of which is the strong association between HRT and cancer. To make this point clear requires a synopsis of several studies that elucidate this correlation.

Estrogen Replacement Therapy and Breast Cancer: The Studies

- ?? In 1995, the Harvard Nurses' Health Study identified an increased risk of 30 to 70 percent for women on ERT.(3)
- ?? A study published in the June 1997 *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that the use of ERT for more than 10 years increased breast cancer deaths by 43%. This large-scale study was based on 60,000 postmenopausal women.(4)
- ?? In 1991, results pooled from sixteen previous studies published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that women who used estrogen for fifteen years increased their risk of breast cancer by 30%. This percentage was increased by ten times for women with a family history of breast cancer.(5)

Clearly, the risk of breast cancer associated with hormone replacement therapy is real and not to be taken lightly. The indiscriminate use of HRT for women experiencing menopause is not justifiable, especially considering most symptoms of menopause can be ameliorated with natural therapies that pose no risk.

If a woman does not have a strong family history, or personal history, of heart disease or osteoporosis, does not smoke or drink alcohol, or does not have high LDL cholesterol and triglycerides, she is a good candidate for natural therapy. Additionally, if a woman has a family history of cancer, it may be in her best interest to avoid HRT and opt for natural remedies.

Natural therapy consists of dietary modifications, vitamin and mineral supplementation, exercises and stress management, and herbal remedies. By making simple changes in lifestyle, health and vitality can be realized well into a woman's later years.

Dietary Modifications

Diet is the single most important factor in minimizing menopausal symptoms and preventing the long-term effects associated with diminished hormones such as heart disease and osteoporosis. It seems ludicrous to discuss diet because all of us are aware of the type of diet that engenders health and prevents disease. I am referring to a plant-based diet. Plants are the most nutrient-packed foods we have available to us. They hold all of the vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and plant chemicals that inhibit tumor formation. In addition they are lacking in the hormones found in meats that are directly related to cancer.

In October 1983, an FDA report found that Synovex-S, a product containing estradiol (a potent estrogen) and a progestin, increased estradiol concentrations in cattle muscle by twelvefold, and in fat by twenty-three fold.(6) A November 1991 report found that the implant Revalor, containing estradiol and a synthetic form of testosterone, caused weight gain in the uterus and ovaries and substantially stimulated the division of breast cells in implanted cows. Residues of this substance averaged as high as 50 parts per billion.(7) Agricultural chemicals are also stored in meats when animals ingest feed that is produced with conventional agricultural techniques. A December 5th 1998 publication of the *Lancet* featured a study that found a dose-dependent relationship between dieldrin, an agricultural chemical, and breast cancer. The study found the more dieldrin a woman eats, the greater her chances of breast cancer.(8) Many pesticides mimic estrogen, and when ingested, seek out estrogen sites in tissues such as the breast. There they exert carcinogenic tendencies and induce cancer.

Taking this information in consideration, I cannot advise that meats should be eaten regularly. Non-organic produce should also be avoided due to the use of pesticides in their production. But there are still more reasons that plants should be consumed in high quantities.

When foods are eaten and digested they create either acidic or alkaline effects. The significance of this fact is that if a diet is too acidic, the blood will become acidic, and minerals will be robbed from bone to raise blood pH. Therefore, the ingestion of acidic foods such as dairy, meats, grains, and legumes will compromise bone integrity. Conversely, eating fruits and vegetables, foods that are alkaline in nature, will function to support strong bones. What is

needed is a balance between healthy acidic foods such as grains and legumes, and alkaline foods such as fruits and vegetables.

Eating healthy fats, such as those found in oily fishes, nuts, and olive oil, are an important means to decrease heart disease. An article in the November, 1998 *Science News* discussed the Nurses' Health Study that found women who consumed at least 5 ounces of nuts a week were only 65% as likely to suffer from coronary artery disease, including fatal heart attacks, than those who ate nuts rarely.(9) Like olive oil, many nuts are rich in monounsaturated fat that has been shown to beneficially affect blood cholesterol levels. Unlike olive oil, however, nuts are also high in other essential fatty acids that are necessary for health. Nuts also seem to work better than liquid oil supplements by releasing their fat in a time-released fashion. When eating nuts, it is best to eat them raw to avoid the damage of roasting. Ideally, raw nuts should be germinated by soaking them in water over night. This allows the enzymes to activate, thereby facilitating digestion.

Botanical Therapy

Herbal therapy is unique, and should be distinguished from vitamin therapy. Herbs are weak drugs, while vitamins are substances the body requires to carry out normal physiological processes. When properly prepared to preserve active constituents (chemicals that give the herb its therapeutic activity), herbs exert physiological changes in the body similar to prescription drugs. However, unlike drugs, there are generally no side-effects when taking herbs at recommended dosages.

Of special consideration is the existence of many herbs that possess weak "estrogenic" activity. Sometimes termed phytoestrogens, estrogenic herbs are able to bind to estrogen receptors in a woman's body, thereby exerting a relative increase in estrogenic activity. What this means to a women going through menopause with a deficiency of estrogen, is that some of the symptoms of menopause (hot flashes, mood swings, depression, etc.) can be ameliorated. Perhaps even more important is the ability of these phytoestrogens to minimize environmental toxins.

Man-made chemicals in our environment that have biologic effects are termed xenobiotics. Xenobiotics that have an affinity for estrogen receptors are known as xenoestrogens, and are probably responsible for the increase in incidence of many cancers. Most pesticides are potent xenoestrogens and male animals in the wild have actually been found to have higher estrogen levels than their female counterparts due to the run-off of fields sprayed with these chemicals. It is thought that weak plant estrogens may be able to "tie up" estrogen receptor sites in the body, thereby preventing the binding of damaging xenoestrogens. Xenoestrogens are stored in body fat and can persist for years after exposure.

Black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*) has a long tradition of use for gynecologic disturbances. The root of this herb native to North America was used widely by native Americans to help relieve female complaints. Studies have demonstrated the ability of extracts to bind to estrogen receptors in the uterus as well as decrease levels of luteinizing hormone (the hormone that increases in response to low estrogen levels). The German Commission E, a German government agency responsible for the registration of plants with traditionally and

clinically established health benefits, recognizes extracts of black cohosh to be effective in PMS, dysmenorrhea, and nervousness associated with menopause.

Chaste tree berry (*Vitex agnus-castus*) is another herb heralded for its ability to treat a wide variety of women's health conditions. The traditional use of this herb dates back to Ancient Greece and Medieval Europe. There is evidence that Vitex has dopaminergic properties that inhibit the secretion of prolactin. High levels of prolactin are associated with breast soreness, water retention, mammary dysplasia, and depression associated with PMS. Elevated levels of prolactin also decrease the life of the corpus luteum, this decreasing the ovarian production of progesterone. This may be the reason Vitex is thought to possess a progestogenic effect. Progesterone exerts an antiproliferative effect on breast tissue and antagonizes the proliferative action of estrogen. Research has demonstrated that women with a high estrogen to progesterone ratio are at a higher risk for breast cancer. Chaste tree berry may be able to prolong the effects of progesterone before and during menopause when menstrual irregularities are occurring, and a tendency for fluctuating hormones exists.

Wild yam (*dioscorea villosa*) contains diosgenin, the natural precursor to progesterone when manipulated in the lab. Although the human body is incapable of converting diosgenin to progesterone, the herb does seem to exert an estrogenic effect when taken internally or applied externally. Ancient Chinese herbal formulas that address the discomforts of menopause include yam for its nourishing, cooling, and moisturizing ability.

Licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) is a truly amazing herb because of its diverse actions. It has been used traditionally as a demulcent (soother), expectorant, and mild laxative. It is also for ulcers, asthma, pharyngitis, malaria, abdominal pain, insomnia, and infections. The major active components are glycyrrhizin and isoflavonoids. Like ginseng, it prevents cortisone-induced shrinking of the thymus and subsequent immunosuppression caused by chronic stress. Probably the most important function of licorice root related to menopause is in its ability to tonify the adrenal glands. With decreased ovarian function, more responsibility is placed upon the adrenal glands to synthesize estrogen and androgens. Licorice root is able to prevent damage that may otherwise occur. Recent studies demonstrate licorice may help to normalize cholesterol synthesis and bile flow, which is important to cardiovascular health and the assimilation of fat-soluble vitamins and fatty acids.

Although soy foods and flaxseeds are not considered herbs, they are nonetheless plants and deserve special attention. **Soy** (*Glycine max*) and **flaxseed** (*Linum usitatissimum*) are rich in phytoestrogens known as isoflavonoid glycosides and lignans, respectively. When eaten on a frequent basis, these foods may protect against breast cancer. A recent study found that individuals who ate 17 to 25 grams per day of soy protein reduced their serum cholesterol 9.3 percent, reduced serum LDL 12.9 percent, and reduced serum triglycerides by 10 percent while HDL levels were unaffected.

Vitamins and Minerals

?? **B complex**: necessary for a multitude of physiological processes; helps ease stress-related fatigue.

?? **Pantothenic Acid (Vitamin B5)**: supports stress hormone and sex hormone metabolism via cholesterol synthesis; involved in memory and brain function.

- ?? Pyridoxine (Vitamin B6): helps with symptoms associated with bloating and water retention; supports the adrenals.
- ?? PABA (para-aminobenzoic acid): may decrease hepatic inactivation of estrogen; may increase the half-life of corticosteroids.
- ?? Bioflavonoids: strengthen capillaries; provide antioxidant support.
- ?? Vitamin C: adrenal support; aids immune system function; protects against free radical damage; cardiovascular support and cancer prevention.
- ?? Vitamin E: can relieve hot flashes; prevents coronary artery disease.
- ?? Calcium: reduces risk of osteoporosis.
- ?? Magnesium: facilitates muscle relaxation; good for heart and necessary for proper bone growth.
- ?? Boron: may increase sex hormone levels and may play a role in maintaining bone health.

I do not recommend taking all of the above individually, but rather using a good multi-vitamin/multi-mineral supplement that will contain all of the above substances as well as others necessary to good health. Since 1998, I have used in my practice a custom supplement that is individually tailored to each person's needs. Information is obtained from a simple urine specimen that will identify antioxidant levels, detoxification capabilities, and other health parameters. The urine kit is easily obtained in the mail and conducted in the privacy of your home, then mailed via airborne express to the laboratory for analysis. Your custom supplement is sent within two weeks. Using a custom supplement has the advantage of taking the guesswork out of supplementation, as well as eliminating the need of remembering to take fifteen different pills at different times of the day!

Conclusion

There are numerous considerations that must be made when a woman decides whether to undergo conventional hormone replacement therapy, or instead use natural therapeutic approaches. HRT is not for everyone; however, many medical doctors are prescribing it as a treatment standard. Although some women experience short-term relief for menopausal symptoms, the long-term effects have to be considered. For most, the risk of cancer far outweighs any concern for cardiovascular disease or osteoporosis.

Natural therapy is simple and rational. Modifying eating habits, exercising, reducing stress, and supplementing with vitamins and herbs will not only decrease the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis, but will improve overall health.

Resources:

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