

Menopause, Part II

By Elaine Stillerman, LMT

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Progesterone ranks second to estrogen in its importance as a female hormone.

It is made in the ovaries and, to a smaller degree, the adrenal glands. It stimulates the growth of the lining of the uterus to support the fertilized egg, helps in the production of breast milk, and maintains pregnancy.

Progesterone is beneficial in decreasing the risks of endometrial cancer and has many metabolic influences.

It enhances mood elevation and acts as a calmativie, helps reduce premenstrual syndrome and menopausal hot flashes, regulates fluid balance, encourages thyroid hormone activity and normalizes blood sugar levels.

Progesterone also plays a role in restoring and maintaining libido, and helps build bone mass. Together, estrogen and progesterone regulate a woman's monthly cycle and prepare the uterus for pregnancy.

The severity of menopausal symptoms vary from woman to woman, but it is safe to say that almost 75 percent of women experience at least some of the symptoms, with hot flashes and vaginal atrophy the most reported. Hot flashes, also known as "power surges," are the classic sign of menopause. Often unannounced, these sudden feelings of intense heat, flushing and copious perspiration, spread all over the body; these symptoms may be followed by chills. In addition to the decreased levels of estrogen, other factors that contribute to hot flashes are hot and humid weather, enclosed spaces, alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods.

Women who have undergone hysterectomies are more apt to have hot flashes. This internal fire lasts from a few seconds to several minutes and can be very uncomfortable and embarrassing. Some women experience hot flashes for just a year or two, while others continue to have them even decades after menopause.

One of the most helpful herbs known to reduce the severity of hot flashes (and memory loss) is black cohosh (*cimicifuga racemosa*). Native to Eastern North America, this herb is widely used for female reproductive problems from dysmenorrhea (difficult menstruation) to labor stimulation and menopause. There is much research documenting the effectiveness of black cohosh in balancing a woman's glandular system. In a study of estrogen-dependent cancer, black cohosh was given along with Tamoxifen. The herb worked along with the cancer drug to help block the growth of breast cancer cells; it appeared that the combination was more effective than the drug alone (Nesselhut, et.al.1998).

Dong Quai, another powerful emmenagogue (pertaining to women's reproductive health), is used pervasively in China to address women's reproductive problems. It is a natural form of estrogen and proves to be a hormone balancer beneficial to the treatment of hot flashes. Wild yam is another popular herb used to support female reproductive health and treat hot flashes, irritability, depression, insomnia and other menopausal symptoms. And some women get relief from menopausal symptoms with licorice root.

Other ways to address hot flashes are to keep as cool as possible, avoid alcohol, caffeine and spicy foods, and wear natural fibers. Drink plenty of water and cool liquids. A full body massage can help regulate body temperature, and stimulation of Spleen 3, the hormone balancer, along with Liver 3 for water balance is very helpful.

Vaginal thinning can be very uncomfortable, even painful for some women. Since estrogen has a major role in maintaining the health and function of the vagina and surrounding tissues (uterus, urinary bladder and urethra), low levels of the hormone may cause these organs to weaken and shrink. When the bladder is affected, urinary incontinence, infection or painful urination may occur. The thinning of the vagina may result in painful intercourse, dryness and itching. It is estimated that at least 50 percent of women over 60 have some degree of vaginal dryness. The good news is that regular sexual intercourse actually helps keep the vagina moist and toned. Black cohosh can help by improving the thickness and elasticity of vaginal tissues.

Women should be aware of some of the serious consequences of menopause, as well. Bone thinning, or osteoporosis, which occurs naturally in both men and women after the age of 40, is particularly aggressive after menopause. Skeletal bones thin out and become brittle and more prone to fracture, with the bones of the spine, wrists and hips the most susceptible. Hormonal supplementation, especially those rich in estradiol, can help maintain bone mass. A proper diet rich in calcium is also essential to maintaining bone health.

Calcium should be consumed from a wide variety of foods to be most beneficial. Weight-bearing exercises not only help to maintain bone health but also are vital to increase bone mass at any age.

The risk for heart disease increases in women after menopause; in fact, it is the leading cause of death among women. Originally, it was believed that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) reduced the risk of heart disease in menopausal women. Since then, we have learned the opposite is more accurate: HRT contributes to higher rates of heart disease, stroke, blood clots and breast cancer.

To lower elevated cholesterol levels and contribute to overall health, a diet rich in phytoestrogens (plant nutrients that mimic estrogen in the body) can be helpful. The major phytonutrients that promote estrogen-like activity are isoflavonoids (genistein and daidzien from soybeans) and lignans (from nuts and flax seeds). This means including soy products, whole-grain cereals, seeds (particularly flax), nuts (walnuts), and many herbs as a regular part of the diet. Soy is not for everyone, however. A connection between soy products and breast cancer is still being investigated, and the results are inconclusive. Cardiovascular exercise is also vital for a healthy heart, elevated mood and general well-being. Exercising, eating well and embracing a wholesome lifestyle will help minimize the discomforts of menopause and promote optimum health.

Menopause is an unavoidable fact of life, but one of the most pleasurable and effective ways to treat many of the discomforts of menopause is massage therapy. A full body treatment can help balance a woman's hormones, encourage the elimination of excess fluid, elevate her mood and make her feel more accepting about the inevitable changes in her body, mind and life.

Resources

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