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Management of ‘Change of Life’ (Menopause) through various therapies

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Introduction

Menopause is a natural hormone (estrogen) deficient state that occurs at the age of 45-55 years in women. After the age of 40 years, ovaries reduce their production of sex hormones. As a result, the menses as well as other body functions are disturbed. Finally the menses cease permanently. This ultimate pause is described as menopause. Needless to say that this phase also marks the end of fertility in a woman. With an increase in life expectancy, menopause has become an inevitable phenomenon in a woman's life and many years are spent in the postmenopausal phase. In this millennium, a woman perceives menopause ‘change of life’ as an opportunity to concentrate on new activities and bring out the best in her.

Common symptoms of menopause

1. Feeling of intense heat (hot flashes) in body on some occasions
2. Profuse sweating at night
3. Excessive falling of hair
4. Irregular menstrual periods with excessive or scanty bleeding
5. vaginal dryness and itching
6. Irritable nature
7. Sleeplessness Lassitude
8. Poor concentration, urinary urgency and weight gain
9. Mood swings

In addition, osteoporosis (thinning and weakening of bones), heart disease, and Alzheimer's disease (progressive loss of memory and concentration) are the long-term hazards of menopause.

The average onset of menopausal symptoms, often referred to as per menopause, is 50.5 years but it is not at all uncommon for women in their early 40s to begin to detect changes in their bodies. While in theory the lead-up to the actual cessation of menses is a year to five years, some women go through ten to eleven years of managing an array of symptoms in their lives.

Some women are lucky and seem to go through the menopause relatively easy with very little interference to their daily lives. However many are unfortunate and find this time of their life particularly hard to deal with and many problems can occur during the transition, changing their life drastically. While doctors can do a lot to help women who suffer greatly during the menopause, there is another alternative, that of using natural remedies. Looking around, one can find a whole host of products which claim to help during the `change of life`. However, how effective they are is not altogether known as herbal remedies are not regulated as well as are traditional drugs. Nevertheless, they are traditionally much more cost effective treatments than prescription medication and are much gentler on body systems.

While conventional medical wisdom has tended to treat menopause as a disorder to be cured, more and more women are honouring it as a natural process - a part of being a woman - and managing the transition through natural means rather than with hormone replacement therapies that have been linked to stroke and to cancer. A good support system, usually represented by other women who have already gone through the process or who are on the same journey, is a vital aspect of managing all elements of this life transition.

There is no one particular remedy that works for all women as everyone has different emotions and symptoms when going through the menopause. There are all in one combinations specifically aimed at treating the menopause or one can take several herbal remedies for the symptoms which bother one the most.

Herbs for Dealing with Menopause

For centuries women have turned to herbs for menopause-related symptoms. The herbs available today are often based on tried and true therapies dating back to ancient natural treatment philosophies. For instance, in the system of Chinese herbs, menopause has long been addressed with the use of Dong Quai whereas Black Cohosh is a Native American remedy. A number of natural remedies such as Black Cohosh, Chaste Tree Berry, and Evening Primrose Oil are prescribed for alleviating menopausal symptoms by physicians in Europe more often than prescription hormone replacement therapies. While all herbs will not work for all women, it is certainly worth a woman's time to try the various remedies. In surveying the range of available herbs, menopause symptoms responded best to those listed below.

Agnus castus

A number of herbs termed 'adaptogens', which have a balancing effect on the body have been traditionally used in menopausal conditions. Among them.

Agnus castus (chaste tree) is by far the most potent remedy for hot flashes as it contains the chemical precursors of the sex hormones. It stimulates and normalizes the function of the pituitary gland which controls and balances the hormones in the body.

Black Cohosh

Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), a perennial member of the buttercup family native to North America is considered to be one of the top herbs for menopause problems. It relieves hot flashes, night sweats, and mild mood changes. Although its mechanism of action is not completely understood, it does not cause increased menstrual bleeding and does not illustrate estrogen binding or estrogen-like activities as once believed. Although dosage varies according to formulation a common strength would be 20 mg taken twice daily. Some women experience gastric discomfort, but in general side effects with Black Cohosh are rare. Persons with high blood pressure should consult their physician before beginning to use this herb. The German agency that regulates herbs does not recommend using black cohosh for longer than six months. Side effects can include nausea, vomiting, dizziness, visual problems, slow heartbeat, and excessive sweating. Black cohosh is not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, so women must be careful about the safety and purity of this supplement.

Soy Isoflavones

Soy is a rich source of plant estrogens that have a structure similar to that of human estrogen and affect the way estrogen is metabolized in the body without any negative effects. Studies conducted with Asian women whose diets contained 40 to 80mg of soy isoflavones per day as compared to American women who used only 3mg, revealed that Asian women exhibited fewer symptoms of menopause. Thus introducing more soy into the diet over a period of four to twelve weeks improves instances of hot flashes. There is no set dosage and use is guided by gastric tolerance. The best food sources of soy isoflavones are raw or roasted soybeans, soy flour, soy milk, and tofu. Soy sauce and soy oil do not contain isoflavones.

Dong Quai

The Chinese herb Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*) has been used for thousands of years to lessen menstrual cramps and to treat the symptoms of menopause. It is particularly good to regularize menstrual flow, which becomes erratic with the onset of perimenopausal symptoms. Typically Dong Quai is taken in doses of 300 to 500mg two to three times a day. In cases of hypersensitivity to Dong Quai menstrual bleeding can increase and fever may also be present requiring discontinuance of use of the herb. Persons taking a blood thinner, should not begin using Dong Quai without consulting their physician.

Wild Yam

Wild Yam (*Dioscorea villosa*) is a herb used topically as a natural form of progesterone. Not only does the use reportedly ease the hormonal fluctuations which plague menopausal women, wild yam also eases the pain of endometriosis and can shrink the fibroid cysts that often appear in women at this stage of their lives. There are no known drug interactions or side effects and the cream is usually rubbed on the abdomen or thighs.

St. Johns wort

St. Johns wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) has widely been used for the treatment of depression; it can be useful over short term to help with mild to moderate depression, but should not be taken for a period longer than two years. and should not be taken with antidepressants.

Evening primrose (*Oenothera sp.*)

It is often taken to help relieve painful breasts and other symptoms of menopause but in recent tests conducted there was no proof found that it did help to relieve symptoms associated with menopause.

Ginseng (*Acanthopanax sp.*)

This is often used to relieve symptoms of stress and anxiety and give the immune system a boost. While the product doesn't seem to relieve many symptoms associated with the menopause it did, in recent tests, appear to help with a general overall sense of well-being.

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*)

It is one of the most popular herbs used in herbal remedies today. Goldenseal has traditionally operated as a healing herb of Native Americans; of late it has entered the European herbal cabinet also. The part of the Goldenseal plant that is most commonly used is the rhizome. The rhizome is traditionally harvested in the fall, and it is the main ingredient in many herbal remedies. Many traditional herbalists recommend the rhizome of the Goldenseal plant as an excellent drying and mucus-reducing remedy that works well for the gastric, and upper respiratory tract. It is also used for the vaginal mucous membranes. The Goldenseal plant is often used as an herbal remedy to treat gynecological problems. It can help reduce the severity of menopausal symptoms, and it has been known to ease the pain associated with premenstrual symptoms, especially symptoms linked to stagnation. Even though Goldenseal has proven itself to be a very effective healing herb, there are some cautions one should take when ingesting herbal remedies that contain Goldenseal as one of its main ingredients. For instance, Goldenseal is well known as a powerful uterine stimulant, so its use should be avoided by women who are pregnant. Goldenseal is also well known as a hypertensive, so it should be avoided in known cases of high blood pressure.

Ayurvedic Remedies for Menopausal Syndrome

Ayurveda the science of life, advocates a holistic treatment of menopausal syndrome by utilizing various herbs and minerals and offers a reliable option to the conventional treatment. Simple Ayurvedic remedies, very useful in these conditions, use phytoestrogens that are estrogen-like substances derived from plants. They mimic the actions of the estrogens in the body but are free from their side-effects. But if taking the Pill, any fertility drugs, HRT or any other hormonal treatment or other medication, any of the above may be taken only on medical advice.

Commonly used herbs in menopausal symptoms are *Emblica officinalis*, *Hemidesmus indicus*, *Terminalia arjuna* and *Saraca indica*. Useful Ayurvedic preparations are *Ashokarishta*, *Dashamularishta*, *Ashok Ghana*, *Dashamool Ghana*, *Lodhra Ghana*, *Manjishtha Ghana*, *Trivang Bhasma* etc. Evanova is an exceptional herbal formula containing the plant *Evanova* that helps

women cope with the discomfort and unpleasant symptoms associated with menopause. Clinical trials and research have shown that Evanova is an ideal alternative to Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), without the linked risks and adverse effects. It contains phytoestrogens that are risk-free; it works to get better hormone utilization and regulates the whole hormonal balance. It is mostly helpful for those who experience mood swings, sleeplessness, and petulance or hot flashes.

Allopathic Medications

In allopathic medicine, normally physicians prescribe hormone therapy (HT) also referred to as hormone replacement therapy (HRT). It consists of estrogens or a combination of estrogens and progesterone (progestin). Besides being expensive, HRT is now not very popular because of the reported associated risk of developing breast and uterine cancers. HRT is also contra-indicated in women with hypertension, myocardial infarction, recent blood clots, migraine headaches, liver disease and gall bladder disease.

Estrogen therapy

Estrogen is a well-established prescription therapy for hot flashes; it helps build bone mass, reduces the risk of fractures, and improves cholesterol levels. Estrogen can also be helpful in preventing urinary symptoms and in treating uncomfortable vaginal symptoms. But studies of women receiving long-term combined HT with estrogen and progesterone showed an increased risk for heart attack, stroke, and breast cancer. Women taking estrogen therapy alone showed an increased risk for stroke and endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus). More recently, studies have suggested that the cardiovascular risks associated with hormone therapy may be more relevant to older postmenopausal women rather than those in the perimenopause or early postmenopausal period. The decision regarding hormone therapy, therefore, should be individualized by each woman and her healthcare professional based on her medical history, the severity of the symptoms, and the potential risks and benefits of hormone administration.

Estrogen is available in a variety of forms, including vaginal suppositories and creams (which are mainly useful for vaginal symptoms), skin patches (Vivelle, Climara, Estraderm, Esclim, Alora), and oral tablets.

Bioidentical hormone therapy

There has been increasing interest in recent years in the use of so-called "bioidentical" hormone therapy in perimenopausal women. Bioidentical hormone preparations are medications that contain hormones that have the same chemical formula as those made naturally in the body. The hormones are created in a laboratory by altering compounds derived from naturally-occurring plant products. Some bioidentical hormone preparations are made at special pharmacies called compounding pharmacies, which make the preparations on a case-by-case basis for each patient. These individual preparations are not regulated by the FDA, because compounded products are not standardized. Advocates of bioidentical hormone therapy argue that the products, applied as creams or gels, are absorbed into the body in their active form without the need for "first pass" metabolism in the liver and that their use may avoid potentially dangerous side effects of synthetic hormones used in conventional hormone therapy. However, studies to establish the long-term safety and effectiveness of these products have not been carried out.

Medications other than estrogen

SSRIs The class of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), typically used in the treatment of depression and anxiety, has been shown to be effective in reducing menopausal hot flashes. The SSRI that has been tested most extensively is venlafaxine (Effexor), although other SSRI drugs may be effective as well.

Clonidine (Catapres) is a drug that decreases blood pressure. Clonidine can effectively relieve hot flashes in some women. Side effects include dry mouth, constipation, drowsiness, and difficulty in sleeping.

Gabapentin (Neurontin), a drug primarily used for the treatment of seizures, has also been used successfully to treat hot flashes.

Progestin drugs have also been successfully used to treat hot flashes. Megestrol acetate (Megace) is sometimes prescribed over short-term to help in relief from hot flashes. Serious effects can occur if the medication is abruptly discontinued, and so megestrol is not usually recommended as a first-line drug to treat hot flashes. Another unpleasant side effect of Megestrol is that it may lead to weight gain. Another form of progesterone, medroxyprogesterone acetate (Depo-Provera) administered by injection, can also sometimes be useful in treating hot flashes, but may also lead to weight gain as well as bone loss.

Natural Alternatives to HRT

Women in many other cultures do not experience the menopause as a crisis demanding medical intervention. Many of them simply do not suffer the physical and emotional symptoms that women in the West are programmed to accept as inevitable. In western society the focus of the menopause is one of loss. Women are programmed to dwell on loss - the loss of periods, the loss of the ability to create life, the loss of hormones, the problems of the 'empty-nest' syndrome. In other societies, this time in a woman's life is seen as one of gain, a time of great wisdom, a time when the emphasis shifts away from doing the chores, working in the fields, to the role of lawmaker and counselor to younger couples, where maturity and experience make a significant and valuable contribution to the family and society.

CAM: According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, other nonprescription techniques may relieve the symptoms of menopause. These techniques include meditation, acupuncture, hypnosis, biofeedback, deep breathing exercises, and paced respiration (a technique of slow breathing using the stomach muscles). Natural treatment programmes aim at encouraging optimum health, so that the body can manage this natural event with ease.

Dietary changes: A well-balanced diet is essential during the menopause as it enables the body to adjust automatically to the hormone changes, naturally maintaining oestrogen from the adrenal glands and fat deposits. Phytoestrogens that naturally occur in certain foods such as soya are known for their effectiveness in menopausal problems. Soya contains two flavonoids, genistein and daidzein, and studies have shown that they are chemically similar to Tamoxifen,

which is the drug used to prevent a recurrence of breast cancer. These very weak plant oestrogens latch on to the oestrogen receptors in the breast and they stop the more powerful carcinogenic oestrogens getting through. So they have a protective effect, as well as helping to balance hormones, which are responsible for menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes. Phytoestrogens have also been studied extensively for their effect on lowering cholesterol, so they can have protective effects in terms of heart disease, which is important around the menopause.

Observational studies have found a lower prevalence of breast cancer, heart disease, and hip fracture rates among people living in places like Southeast Asia, where diets are typically high in phytoestrogens. These studies have generated a great deal of interest in the United States about the health benefits of phytoestrogens. According to the Food and Drug Administration, sales of soy foods, a major source of phytoestrogens, has increased dramatically in the past decade. Consumption of plants which contain estrogenic substances, such as alfalfa, soybeans, soy sprouts, crushed flaxseeds, garlic, green beans, sesame seeds, wheat, yams, pumpkin seeds, cucumbers, corn, apples, anise seeds, cabbage, beets, olive oil, olives, papaya, oats, peas, sunflower seeds should be increased to increase the levels of estrogen. These are all important sources of natural estrogens and are loaded with vitamins, fiber and minerals essential not only for menopause, but to maintain overall good health.

Supplements: For maintaining healthy bones during the menopause, supplements (adequate nutrients) are beneficial. Many of the following supplements are also known to help with the symptoms of menopause. A good quality multivitamin and mineral supplement forms the foundation of a supplement programme. Addition of nutrients listed below in slightly higher amounts is known to be helpful for the menopause.

Vitamin C is known for its beneficial effect on the immune system, strengthening blood vessels and also for its role as an antioxidant in the body. So not only is Vitamin C important for preventing illness, and for encouraging your health in general, but it also has specific benefits at the menopause.

Giving women vitamin C with bioflavonoids has been shown to help reduce hot flushes. Vitamin C helps to build up collagen which gives skin its elasticity and it is therefore helpful in the prevention and treatment of vaginal dryness (which can cause discomfort when the vagina loses some of its 'stretch'). It can also help retain the elasticity in the urinary tract and so prevent leakage or stress incontinence, which is common at the menopause. Collagen is also important for bones.

Vitamin E is an important vitamin to consider at the menopause. Over many years clinical studies have shown its effect on reducing hot flushes. Vitamin E is also helpful in vaginal dryness and one study showed that just 400 IU taken daily for up to 4 months helped 50 per cent of the women given supplemental vitamin E. It can also be used internally inside the vagina every night for about six weeks to help relieve dryness.

B Vitamins are called the 'stress' vitamins because they are enormously beneficial when you are under a great deal of pressure. Symptoms of B-vitamin deficiency include anxiety, tension, irritability and poor concentration.

Therefore, supplementing them in the form of a good B-complex supplement can be useful if you have any of these symptoms of stress. During the menopause it is extremely important that you give your adrenal glands (which will be called into action to produce oestrogen) a break. B vitamins do this and also restore energy levels.

Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs): Signs of an essential fatty acid deficiency are dry skin, lifeless hair, cracked nails, fatigue, depression, dry eyes, lack of motivation, aching joints, difficulty in losing weight, forgetfulness, breast pain - all symptoms that could be 'blamed' on the menopause. They need to be supplemented around the menopause because they can help with many of the symptoms. Furthermore, because they help to 'lubricate' the body in general, they can help with vaginal dryness.

Magnesium: This is an important mineral for bones at the menopause. Magnesium is also known as 'nature's tranquilliser', so it helps with symptoms such as anxiety, irritability and other mood changes.

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