

# A Naturopathic Approach to Menopause

By: Dr. Ted Suzelis, N.D.

Menopause is the natural process in a woman's life where menstruation ceases. Most women start menopause in their early fifties and the process lasts for 8 to 10 years. In many cultures, menopause is celebrated as the growth of a woman past her childbearing years. In Native American societies, a post-menopausal woman is revered as a wise teacher and sometimes takes the role of a shaman-like healer. They believe that women become wise after menopause, because their body's energy is no longer trapped in the reproductive organs, but brought to her head to improve the mental processes.

The symptoms of menopause vary greatly and some women are relatively free of symptoms aside from the cessation of menstruation, while others suffer severe symptoms. The most common symptoms of menopause include hot flashes, insomnia, mood swings, weight gain, dry skin, vaginal dryness, and frequent urinary tract infections.

The main conventional treatment for menopause is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), a combination of the hormones estrogen and progesterone taken daily to decrease the symptoms of menopause. In July 2002, two major studies showed that HRT is not a safe therapy, as previously thought. The Women's Health Initiative, an 8 year study of HRT in 16,600 post-menopausal women was stopped 3 years early, because of the dangerous side effects they found: 41% increase in strokes, a 29% increase in heart disease, and a 26% increase in breast cancer. The only benefits noted were a 37% reduction in colorectal cancer and a 23% decrease in osteoporotic fractures.

Naturopathic medicine is very effective in relieving women of menopausal symptoms and has been found to be just as effective, if not more effective, in preventing osteoporosis and colorectal cancer as HRT. Among the most beneficial therapies for menopausal symptoms are diet, exercise, nutritional supplementation and the use of herbs. The most important recommendation for menopausal women is to increase foods high in phytoestrogens. Phytoestrogens are estrogen-like substances found in foods like soybeans, flaxseeds, and alfalfa. Because phytoestrogens are only weak estrogens, they have also been found to prevent breast cancer, unlike the chemical estrogens found in HRT. In Japan, there is no word for menopause. This is probably due to the widespread use of soy products, which contain the phytoestrogens genistein and daidzene, which serve to modulate the severe symptoms of menopause.

The nutritional supplements and herbs used for menopause depend greatly on the symptoms a woman presents with. Vitamin E is beneficial in relief of hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Vitamin C and Hesperidin, when used in combination, may be helpful in relieving hot flashes, as well as reducing leg cramps, nose bleeds, and easy bleeding. The most common herbs used for menopausal symptoms are Black Cohosh, Dong Quai, and Vitex. Chinese patent herbs are an invaluable tool in relieving menopausal symptoms. It is advisable to seek the advice of a Naturopathic Physician if you would wish to use these therapies to reduce symptoms of menopause.

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