

Complementary therapies and the menopause

It's a time that most women don't really look forward to – the menopause. Our bodies are telling us that our reproductive years are over, and while this in itself can be a blessing for some women, the symptoms that accompany the menopause or 'the change' can range from irritating to distressing.

The menopause happens when levels of oestrogen, the female sex hormone, fall and periods cease. This usually happens gradually, you'll notice your periods becoming less frequent and eventually they will stop completely. In the UK, the average age that a woman reaches the menopause is 52.

The peri-menopause

You're officially said to have reached menopause if you haven't had a period for a whole year. Until then, you'll still be noticing changes in your body, and could be going through the peri-menopause. This is the time when hormonal and biological changes start to happen, and when you'll start to feel the physical and emotional symptoms.

The symptoms that you might feel while you're going through this hormonal upheaval can include:

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Palpitations
- Headaches.

You also might find yourself feeling emotional – the emotional symptoms can often feel worse than the physical ones. These include:

- loss of confidence
- depression
- irritability
- forgetfulness
- difficulty in concentrating
- panic attacks.

On top of this, you could also be experiencing vaginal dryness and urinary problems due to the changes in your hormonal balance.

Dealing with the symptoms

Like periods and the associated hormonal upheaval that goes along with them, the menopause is just another fact of life. If your menopause is making you feel ill, or you're suffering from a lot of the symptoms, the doctor is probably your first port of call. For some years, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been the treatment of choice for many women who have been suffering from the distressing physical and emotional symptoms of the menopause. However, some women have been turning their backs on prescription cures and reaching for natural and holistic alternatives to ease their passage through this difficult time.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is one of the five major holistic therapies that has been accepted by the medical establishment, as the House of Lords Select Committee on Complementary and Alternative Medicine believed it to have supporting evidence of effectiveness.

Acupuncture involves having a therapist insert very fine disposable needles into your body at specific points on your body, which stimulates the flow of vital energy. It can feel uncomfortable, although depending on which type of acupuncture you have, you may feel little or nothing as the needles are inserted.

Studies have revealed that acupuncture can be effective in reducing some of the symptoms of menopause, in particular hot flushes and feelings of anxiety. One study has also shown that having acupuncture actually had a similar effect on hormones to HRT¹, but more research is needed.

Self treating with herbal remedies

If you walk into any high street chemist or health food shop, there may be a shelf dedicated to 'women's health' which generally covers menstrual problems, pregnancy supplements and menopausal remedies.

Many women prefer to manage their hormones using herbal remedies – after all herbal remedies have been around in one shape or form for centuries, and are widely used to treat a whole host of ailments. Herbal remedies are easy to find, and can be quickly self prescribed with a little know how. Herbal medicine was also named as one of the five top complementary therapies by the House of Lords.

Black Cohosh - This herb has been widely used amongst Native Americans to treat gynaecological problems for centuries, and it's marketed here as a herb that can help relieve the hot flushes and sleep disturbances associated with menopause. It has been suggested that the herb has a similar effect on the body as oestrogen² and

in Germany black cohosh is a widely used and accepted treatment for the menopause.

Side effects from using black cohosh are rare, but the European Medicines Agency has warned that it may cause liver problems³. If you notice yellow skin and eyes, feel pain in the top of your stomach, vomit or notice that your urine darkens, stop taking the herb and see your doctor.

Evening Primrose Oil - Evening primrose oil is a rich source of gammalinolenic acid (GLA) which is an essential fatty acid, and is useful if you suffer from breast tenderness. It can take some time to have an effect. There have been few reported side effects from using evening primrose oil.

St John's Wort - St John's Wort is a herb that is widely used for mild depression, and trials have indicated that it does seem to have a positive effect on menopausal symptoms, especially if used in conjunction with black cohosh⁴.

There are some known side effects and interactions associated with St John's Wort, and you should seek medical advice if you are thinking of using it and you are also taking;

- the combined oral contraceptive pill
- digoxin
- theophylline
- warfarin
- cyclosporin
- antidepressant drugs

If there is any chance that you could be pregnant, you should also avoid this herb.

Reflexology

Reflexology is where a therapist stimulates specific points found on the soles of your feet to unblock your body's energy channels and help energy to circulate effectively. One of the main effects of reflexology treatment is that it is said to restore hormonal balance, and so could be helpful in dealing with menopausal symptoms.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is another one of the 'Big Five' holistic therapies according to the House of Lords. In homeopathic medicine, there is a belief that "like cures like," so small, highly diluted quantities of medicinal substances that are known to cause similar symptoms (if they were given in higher or more concentrated doses) are given to stimulate the natural defences of the body into self-healing.

Some studies have shown that homeopathy works well to help women reduce the symptoms of the menopause, especially reducing hot flushes and improving the general quality of life⁵.

Summary

- A woman is said to have reached menopause after one year without a period
- The symptoms associated with menopause actually start before this, in perimenopause
- Some women choose HRT – others prefer to treat symptoms naturally
- Acupuncture may have a similar effect on hormones to HRT
- There are several herbal remedies said to help menopausal symptoms
- Reflexology and homeopathy are also used to treat the symptoms.

References

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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