

HOW TO COPE WITH MENOPAUSE

Menopause is a normal physiological process that occurs in women over 40 and is marked by the absence of menstruation for at least 12 months, when the activities of the ovaries cease, female hormone levels drop, eggs are no longer released and fertility ends.

Menopause is not a medical condition, but for some women, menopause can be accompanied by uncomfortable symptoms. However, these symptoms will naturally improve 2 – 5 years after its onset and can be treated if they are severe and interfere with your quality of life.

Menopause hormonal changes, however, do increase the risk of osteoporosis (brittle bone) and fracture as well as heart disease. Peri- and post- menopausal women should seek regular health screening, learn about their health risks and actively manage their health and healthcare (See “How to Take Charge of Your Healthcare” on page 7).

Symptoms of Menopause

- Hot flushes – This is a feeling of intense heat that spreads from the face, neck and chest that usually lasts for a few minutes, and can be accompanied by sweating and palpitation; hot flushes can start two years before menopause and last for a few years after.
- Night sweats – This is the same as hot flushes but can interfere with sleep.
- Sleep disturbance – Frequently the result of night sweats, this can also be related to anxiety and stress, but the lack of sleep can lead to day time fatigue, irritability, as well as poorer short-term memory and concentration.
- Vaginal symptoms – The decrease in female hormone levels lead to thinning of the vaginal lining, which lead to vaginal dryness, itching, and discomfort as well as discomfort during intercourse.
- Mood changes – Hormonal changes can also lead to depression, anxiety, irritability, and nervousness in some women around the time of menopause, and can be exacerbated by sleep disturbances and mid-life stresses such as coping with issues of the sandwich generation, with care-giving responsibilities for elderly parents and teenage children.
- Urinary symptoms – Increased frequency of urination, urinary tract infections and incontinence (the inability to control one's bladder with involuntary passing of urine when laughing, coughing or lifting heavy weights) may occur.

- Joint pain – Early morning pain and stiffness of the hands, knees, hips, shoulders and lower back occasionally occur around the time of menopause.
- Physical symptoms and changes – Hormonal changes also lead to changes in skin texture (drier or oilier and appearance of fine lines from loss of elasticity), thinning of scalp hair, increase in facial hair, weight gain, redistribution of fat from hips and thighs to the abdomen. Occasionally, there is the sensation of insects crawling on or under the skin; the medical term is formication and has a similar physiological basis as that for the sensation of pins and needles.

Treatment

For some women, lifestyle changes – such as regular exercise, a healthy diet, limiting alcohol and caffeine intake, developing better sleep habits, managing stress and quitting smoking – would be sufficient to manage menopausal symptoms and the increased risks for heart disease and osteoporosis. If necessary, however, other medications are available.

HRT (hormone replacement therapy) used to be the mainstay for treatment of menopause symptoms and associated health risks, but recent research has shown that HRT increases the risk for cancer of the lining of the uterus (endometrial cancer), slight increase in risk for breast cancer (with four years or more of treatment), blood clots, heart disease, and stroke (especially for older women on higher doses of HRT). Some form of HRT may still be indicated for some women, but only after risks and benefits are discussed with a physician experienced with HRT.

Acupuncture has also been shown in recent research to be effective in managing symptoms, especially hot flushes, anxiety and insomnia, and although there is not yet sufficient research done to show evidence, herbs are routinely used in China for the management of menopausal symptoms. Traditionally, TCM recommends certain herbal soups for post-menopausal women, but when necessary, personalised acupuncture and herbal treatments prescribed by a TCM physician may be helpful.

Diet rich in certain foods, such as soy and flaxseed, has shown to have an effect on the symptoms of menopause. Research showed that Japanese women experience much fewer symptoms than their Western sisters, and to some extent, this is related to their soybean rich diet (such as tofu), which contains high levels of phyto-estrogens – chemical compounds similar to female hormones. Although food alone will not be able to address severe menopausal symptoms, it is helpful to include phyto-estrogen rich foods, such as soy products, in a post-menopausal diet.

TONIC SOUPS FOR POST-MENOPAUSAL WOMEN

Pa-Chen Chicken Soup

Half a black chicken, a packet of *Pa-Chen* (from herbal shop)
10 red dates, wolfberry 5 gm.

Method

Rinse the black chicken with hot water; place in a crock pot (or similar slow cookers) with the packet of herbs, red dates, and wolfberry. Add in water (about two rice bowls) and cook for 2 – 3 hours. When ready to serve, add salt to taste.

Effect

Enhances vitality.

Stewed Kampong Chicken Herbal Soup

One whole black chicken, *Dang-Sheng* 6 gm, 8 red dates, wolfberry 10 gm, *Bei-Qi* 4 gm, dried longan 8 pieces, *Huai-Shan* 2 pieces.

Method

Blanch the chicken in boiling water; wash and clean. Place all the herbs and chicken in a large pot and bring to a boil; stew for 2 hours. Add salt to taste.

Effect

Enhances energy.