

Be Wise About Menopause

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In her book, "The Wisdom of Menopause," Christiane Northrup, M.D. challenges conventional medicine. Dr. Northrup says, "The change" or menopause is not simply a collection of physical problems to be "fixed"- whether with hormones or herbs-but a mind-body revolution that brings the greatest opportunity for growth. There is a connection between menopause and a woman's emotional and spiritual life. The choices a woman makes at this time in her life, from the quality of her relationships to the quality of her diet, either secure her health and well-being for the rest of her life or put her future at risk."

Menopause is defined as no menstrual periods for 12 months. The time prior to actually stopping your periods and starting to have symptoms of hormonal changes can be 5 to 10 years. This pre-menopausal time is caused by a decrease in progesterone and therefore the estrogen hormone is dominant. Estrogen dominant symptoms can include irregular menstrual periods, excessive bleeding with periods, bloating, breast swelling and tenderness, mood swings like irritability and depression, weight gain around the middle and hips and premenstrual headaches. Other estrogen dominant symptoms include ovarian cysts, cystic and lumpy breasts, endometriosis, anxiety and easy to anger.

Some women have minimal symptoms of pre-menopause and just glide through gracefully. These women handle stress well, have a healthy lifestyle and positive relationships. The next step in the "change" is to stop having menstrual periods and estrogen drops off rapidly over a few weeks to months. Low estrogen symptoms can include hot flashes, night sweats, non-restful sleep, heart palpitations, fuzzy thinking, vaginal dryness, low sex drive and moodiness. Low testosterone often accompanies or precedes the drop-in estrogen and can cause symptoms of decreased sex drive, decreased overall energy and stamina, decreased ability to build muscle and thinning pubic hair.

Another reason for all of these varied symptoms can be caused due to stress on the thyroid and adrenal glands, as well as the brain neurotransmitters during pre and post menopause. With our stressful lifestyles, many women start into menopause with exhausted resources. The most common stressors that women may face at this time are: excessive, unremitting worry, anger, guilt, anxiety or fear, depression, excessive or lack of exercise, exposure to toxins, chronic allergies, overwork, late hours, insufficient sleep, surgery, chronic illness or unhealed trauma or injury.

Because of the significant impact menopause may bring to women's lives, there are many and varied treatment possibilities. Start by being proactive and work on lifestyle factors. If you are still experiencing significant symptoms, there are herbs and over the counter natural progesterone creams that can be very effective. Dr. Christiane Northrup's book, "The Wisdom of Menopause" has several considerations for menopause, as well as adrenal and thyroid support. Some effective over the counter herbs include black cohosh, natural progesterone cream or Estrovera herbal product by Metagenics.

If all lifestyle and nutraceutical approaches are not successful, then a balanced approach using individualized bio-identical hormone replacement can be considered. These prescription strength hormones are prescribed by physicians and prepared by compounding pharmacies using extracts from soybeans and yams. The molecular structure of these hormones are designed to be an exact match to the human body. These bio-identical hormones can be given

in several forms, including capsules, troches, creams or suppositories. Even though they are natural, monitoring of hormone levels is advised as well as annual gynecology exams. Side effects can occur, so normal precautions and close monitoring by a physician is recommended.

When it comes to hormone replacement therapy, the science we look to for answers can be inconsistent, influenced by market forces, and confusing to researchers, physicians and patients alike. As Dr. Northrup says, "The blessing is that this dilemma forces us to tune in more fully to our inner wisdom, and to make our choices in full partnership with our intuition and intellect. This approach to menopause is the essence of feminine wisdom."

Approaching menopause is not an easy, one-size-fits all answer. Some women may need or want hormone replacement therapy, some simply don't! In my practice of medicine, I enjoy a partnership with women on their journey through menopause; assessing their individual situations, educating about the details, and guiding them in their choices. The choices may be nutritional and herbal support, thyroid and adrenal support, neurotransmitter support, prescription hormones, emotional and spiritual growth or a combination of these approaches. My recommendations are: educate yourself, add a large dose of intuition, prayer and meditation, and feed and exercise your body well. Yes, you can proceed through this transition with boldness, poise and grace.