[IMAGE]

Addressing Menopause Naturally

By Jan Roberts

Women are increasingly concerned about the potential dangers of fluctuating hormone levels during and following menopause - but synthetic hormone replacement therapy has come under fire for its potential risks. What's a woman to do? Consider natural alternatives.

In the past 40 years, menopause, once unmentioned and borne in silence in Western society, has come to be regarded as one of the key life events that can compromise women's physical, mental and emotional well-being. With the increase in women's life expectancy and their expectation of retaining vitality and vigor far longer than their mothers, women initially were offered a solution in the form of hormone replacement therapy. However, HRT is a fairly crude attempt to offset the decrease in natural hormone levels occurring at menopause by introducing a variety of synthetic or animal estrogenic compounds and/or progesterone, at various levels, with dosage largely adjusted by a process of trial and error.

Hormone Replacement Therapy: Risky Business

While initially embraced enthusiastically by women wishing to avoid what they were led to believe was an inevitable decline in "their youth" - changes in skin and hair texture, sex drive and memory - along with mood changes and an increase in hot flashes and night sweats, HRT has now been shown to come with significant risk factors. While there is still no *conclusive* opinion on HRT's potential to increase breast cancer and other side effects, many doctors have resorted to using bio-identical hormones and lower dosage forms.

A close-up of a middle aged woman. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark However, whether the use of bio-identical hormones will reduce the adverse effects seen with HRT is still open to debate and will only truly be known in the longer term. Furthermore, even with lower dosages, unless a doctor is monitoring hormone levels over the woman's full monthly cycle and on a regular basis, both HRT and bio-identical hormone therapy rely on a relatively hit-and-miss approach that may take considerable time to fine tune. Other issues are: What form of estrogen should a woman be given? When does she reach an estrogen "saturation point"? What happens when she has a history of breast cancer in the family? How does her

estrogen dosage affect the levels of hormones naturally occurring in her body? The list of questions goes on.

Soy and Herbal Alternatives: What Works?

Not surprisingly, female patients and many health care practitioners have increasingly turned to natural alternatives, including plant-based solutions such as black cohosh, red clover, wild yam and soy-containing compounds. However, while certainly lacking the potential side effects of HRT, these phyto-compounds still impact only one aspect of the overall physiological changes that occur during the pre- and postmenopausal periods; unless, of course, women are taking three different products! Effectiveness is also an important consideration when dealing with natural alternatives. There are only a few products that have any research to back them.

Most importantly, while many natural alternatives may reduce some symptoms, as a group, they have been clinically shown by the National Institutes of Health to have little real effect on actual hormone levels. It is this decline in hormone levels at menopause that directly relates to a woman’s susceptibility to heart disease, osteoporosis and cognitive function; and is why many doctors, in an attempt to avert these life-threatening conditions, continue to prescribe HRT, despite the potential risks. Other options that have been offered to pre- and postmenopausal women, such as calcium supplementation, are further attempts to fix a symptom, when what is actually required is a much more holistic approach.

Leading the way in this more holistic approach are natural products that work to create an environment for optimal health in women’s bodies, specifically by affecting their own hormone production across the entire endocrine system. According to recent clinical research, these products may do more than merely increase hormone levels; they also may increase bone density; elevate iron and calcium levels, due to improved absorption of vitamins and minerals; reduce "bad" cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein, or LDL) increase "good" cholesterol (HDL), reduce body weight and increase energy.

Diet and Lifestyle: Your Allies in the Fight Against Menopause

These holistic effects mentioned above are further enhanced with the recognition that the distressing symptoms that affect 75 percent of Western women at menopause can largely be considered as diet and lifestyle-related. As the baby boomers reach this stage of life, and as wellness-focused care becomes the catch-cry of this generation, women are not only willing and eager to adopt the health-promotion measures that can make menopausal symptoms a thing of the past, but also will seek out the products that best support

their own efforts and address their core or foundation health.

So, what exactly is core or foundation health, and what are these self-help efforts? First of all, women should know that all of the hormones, neurotransmitters, endorphins and other factors that can reduce menopausal symptoms depend on an adequate supply of vitamins, minerals, aminos and essential fatty acids. These building blocks come from, or have precursors in, the food and drinks women consume. Unfortunately, most modern diets are unlikely to supply an adequate complement of all those building blocks.

Maximize minerals. One simple way to supply some of them is to replace common table salt with a mineral-laden salt. A further simple step can involve drinking water that is mineral-rich, rather than mineral-deficient.

It is important to point out that drinking water which has been purified to the extent there is neither good nor bad left (e.g., reverse osmosis) can lead to significant mineral loss, because the "empty" water leaches minerals from the body.

Eat the right foods. Nutritional status also is compromised by a diet that contains too many carbohydrates and too little protein. Most modern diets are too high in grain-based products, such as bread, cereals, pasta, rice, pastries, cakes and biscuits. However, when women eat the appropriate balance of protein, carbohydrate and fat, they get a host of benefits - normal appetite, emotional stability, mental clarity, more energy and even loss of fat - just from eating the right foods.

Get detoxified. Women also need to get rid of pre-existing accumulated toxicity. Just like landfill sites that become overloaded and wreak havoc in the environment, bodies can become a toxic waste dump and wreak havoc with health. For example, accumulated toxicity will trigger biochemical processes that tell the body to store fat. And unfortunately, being overweight, with the poor body image that may accompany it, can contribute to the depressed state many women experience during menopause. Good detoxification processes require that you consume an abundance of essential nutrients (particularly antioxidants such as vitamins C, E and zinc) and drink at least 2 liters of purified water every day.

Build lean muscle mass. Another contributing factor to healthy aging and reduced experience of menopausal symptoms is the amount of lean muscle in the body. In fact, muscle mass is actually the number-one biomarker for vitality and longevity. Muscle does much more than just move the body around;

it is a very important organ - as important as the heart, the liver and the kidneys. It is like the engine that powers the car. But without a conscious effort to maintain muscle mass, it is lost at the rate of 3 kg per decade from the early 20s on, and the loss accelerates after age 45. As muscle is lost, fat levels increase. Reduced muscle mass also means poor blood glucose control, with the potential for mood swings and emotional instability - common symptoms of menopause. Reduced muscle mass also means compromised mobility and reduced levels of activity, which further translates into some of the issues of menopause. The good news is that it's possible to build muscle at any age.

Increase touch. An often-overlooked factor that adds to the overall burden of menopause is lack of touch. Touch is vitally important throughout our lives, yet it is generally given very little attention in Western society. The sense of touch is the first of our senses to develop and is also the most fundamental. Of course, this offers women and their partners a wonderful opportunity to connect at a very intimate level by giving and receiving a massage, holding one another, caressing and cuddling. This is vital not only in enhancing total well-being, but also in keeping intimacy (often a victim of menopause) alive.

Reduce stress. Women also need to think about stress, since high stress levels will compromise all aspects of health and potentially exacerbate menopausal symptoms. Effective stress management involves reducing the levels of stress to which women are exposed, while at the same time, improving the means by which their bodies cope with stress. Coping better requires good nutrition, a program of regular exercise, meditation or other type of relaxation practice, time for family and leisure pursuits, and time to nurture oneself.

GET Regular, restful sleep. At least eight hours per day helps the body cope better with stress. And satisfying sex is one of the most effective de-stressors of all. Unfortunately, with diminished libido, which is a common symptom of menopause, women often don't practice this most fundamental and effective form of stress reduction.

Love your life. A woman's state of mind also can have a profound effect on her ability to enjoy long-term health and vitality. The best way to nurture that emotional state, or what some refer to as the "energetic anatomy," is for women to "love their life" and let go of all the hurts and unhappiness from the past. Women can further nurture their energetic anatomy by accepting life as it comes and responding to change as a positive force. This includes accepting the reality of aging. When women accept it with grace, revel in their acquired wisdom, and enjoy being proactive in this new stage of life, they are less likely to resist or resent

the loss of reproductive capacity and the passing of youth. This attitude further fosters ongoing health and vitality.

In summary, while the responsibility for a positive attitude rests squarely with women, it is equally important to make lifestyle choices and create an environment conducive to optimal health. There is much women can do to impact their health before, during and after menopause. Talk to your doctor for more information.

What's Wrong with Taking Synthetic HRT?

Many women are given artificial estrogen, alone or in combination with progestin (another hormone), to fight symptoms of menopause. However, for some women, this may increase their chances of getting blood clots, heart attacks, strokes, breast cancer, and gallbladder disease. The Food and Drug Administration recommends women take the smallest dose and for the shortest time possible.

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