

Menopause – a New Perspective.

In Western society during the last 40 years, menopause, once unmentioned and borne in silence, has come to be regarded as one of the key life-events that might compromise women's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. With the increase in women's life expectancy and their further expectation of retaining vitality and vigour for far longer than their mothers, women were initially 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 oestrogenic compounds and/or progesterone, at various levels, with dosage largely adjusted by a process of trial and error. Fortunately, many pharmaceutical companies are moving away from use of up to 200 different oestrogenic compounds to use of one or two which chemically mirror those naturally occurring in a woman's body.

While HRT was initially embraced enthusiastically, by women wishing to avoid what they were led to believe was an inevitable decline in "their youth", skin and hair texture, sex drive, memory and mood, with concurrent increase in hot flashes and night sweats - HRT has now been shown to come with potential risk factors. While there was still no conclusive opinion on the reasons for HRT's potential to increase breast cancer and other side effects, many doctors have resorted to using bio-identical hormones and/or lower dosage forms. 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 trial and error approach which may take considerable time to fine tune. The other issues are: What form of oestrogen should a woman be given? When does she reach oestrogen saturation point? What happens when she has a history of breast cancer in the family? How does her oestrogen dosage affect the levels of hormones naturally occurring in her body? What about other hormone levels and aspects of her health which are also declining? The list goes on...

Not surprisingly, women (and many practitioners) have increasingly turned to natural alternatives, with plant-based solutions including Black Cohosh, Red Clover, Wild Yam and soy-containing compounds. While certainly lacking the potential side-effects, these phyto compounds still impact only one aspect of the overall physiological changes that occur during the pre and post menopausal periods, unless of course women are taking three different products! Efficacy is also an important consideration when dealing with natural alternatives. There are only a few products such as Remifemin that have conducted real clinical trials on their specific products and dosages. And while other companies may copy dosages, it is important to evaluate quality control procedures and product analysis methods which can incorrectly present a product as “the same” when in fact the only thing that is the same is the name of the herbal ingredient.

But most importantly, while many natural alternatives may reduce some symptoms, as a group, they have been clinically shown by the National Institute 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 MDs and Naturopaths, in an attempt to avert these life-threatening conditions, continue to prescribe bio identical hormones. Other options that have been offered to pre and post-menopausal 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, through the delivery of core or foundation health, are adaptogenic products which stimulate a woman’s Hypothalamus Pituitary Adrenal Axis to create an environment for optimal health in her body. One product with extensive clinical research is Femenessence™, which has been demonstrated to increase estradiol, progesterone and reduce FSH in post-menopausal women by affecting their own hormone production. The positive effects of Femenessence™ across endocrine and other regulating systems resulted in increased bone density, increased iron and calcium levels due to improved absorption of vitamins and minerals, increases in HDL (good cholesterol), reductions in body weight and increases in energy.



However, the holistic effects of adaptogens such as Femenessence™ are further enhanced with the recognition that the distressing symptoms that affect 75% of Western women at menopause can be largely considered as diet and lifestyle-related. So as the baby boomers reach this stage of life, 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 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 the hormones, the neurotransmitters, the endorphins and other factors that can reduce menopausal symptoms, depend on an adequate supply of vitamins, minerals, amino and essential, fatty acids. These building blocks come from, or have precursors in, the food and drinks that are consumed. Unfortunately, most modern diets are unlikely to supply an adequate complement of all those building blocks.

One simple way to supply some of them is to replace common table salt (which is in general a synthetic form of sodium chloride), with Original Himalayan Crystal Salt which contains 84 of the minerals that exist in the blood and which need to be replenished regularly. A further simple step can involve drinking water which is mineral rich rather than mineral deficient. Researching which Wellness Water Filter to use is critical as drinking water which has been purified to the extent that there is neither good nor bad left (e.g. reverse osmosis) can lead to significant mineral loss as the 'empty' water leaches minerals from the body.

Nutritional status is also 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, biscuits and so on. However when women eat the appropriate balance of protein, carbohydrate and fat, they get a host of good things happening. These include ... normal appetite, emotional stability, mental clarity, more energy and even fat loss, just from eating the right proportion of different food groups - in other words the right balance can help to make menopause symptoms a thing of the past.

Then there are numerous lifestyle, and environmental factors, that alone, or combined, are potentially detrimental to optimal, healthy ageing. These include alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine or other drugs as well as the chemical or heavy metal pollution that can come from the workplace or even from the kitchen, laundry or bathroom cupboards! Electromagnetic radiation from mobile phones, computer screens, video games, electric blankets, water beds, high voltage power lines and cosmic radiation (flying) can also contribute to compromised health, so women should try to reduce their exposure to as many of these factors as possible.

But even with the most rigorous efforts to steer clear of all these things, women also need to get rid of pre existing accumulated toxicity. Because, 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 that many women experience during menopause. Good detoxification processes require an abundance of essential nutrients (particularly anti-oxidants such as Vitamins C, E and zinc) and at least 2 litres of purified water every day. Another contributing factor to healthy ageing and reduced experience of menopausal symptoms is the amount of lean muscle in the body. In fact that muscle mass is actually the No 1 biomarker for vitality and longevity. Muscle does much more than just move the body around – it's 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 3kg per decade from the early 20s 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, again, 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. But it's possible to build muscle in any decade – women just need to do some weight training exercise, and with that muscle building they can overcome a number of menopausal issues.

A forgotten factor that adds to the overall burden that might contribute to a difficult menopause is lack of touch. Touch is vitally important throughout our lives, yet generally given very little attention in Western society. The sense of touch is the first of our senses to develop and 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, by holding, caressing and cuddling, with a very real place not only in enhancing total wellbeing but in keeping intimacy (often a victim of menopause), well and truly alive.

Also women 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 practise, time for family and leisure pursuits, and 'time-out' to nurture oneself. Then of course, regular, restful sleep (at least 8 hours) helps the body cope better with stress and satisfying sex is one of the most effective de-stressors of all. Unfortunately, with diminished libido, a common symptom of menopause, women often don't practise this most fundamental and effective form of stress reduction.

Women's states of mind also have a profound effect on their ability to enjoy long term, good health and vitality. And the best way to nurture that emotional state or what some individuals refer to as the 'energetic anatomy' is for women to "love their life", and to 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, and of course that includes accepting ageing. When women accept it with grace, revel in their acquired wisdom, enjoying and being pro active in this new stage of life, they are less likely to resist or resent the loss of reproductive capacity and the passing of youth, and will find this attitude further fosters ongoing health and vitality.

In summary while the responsibility for a positive attitude must rest squarely with women, it is equally important to make lifestyle choices and create an environment conducive to optimal health. Diets consisting of whole organic raw foods and mineral-rich water combined with clinically proven adaptogenic products will best support their efforts and work holistically to enhance their core or foundation health.

By Jan Roberts

Jan has spent almost 40 years in the health care industry, 20 of those working in the area of women's reproductive health. She is a pharmacist with a postgraduate diploma in Clinical Nutrition and the Australian representative for Foresight the British Association famous for its work in promoting preconception health care. As co-author of the international best selling series *The Natural Way to Better Babies ... Better Pregnancy ... Better Birth & Bonding ... and Better Breastfeeding*, Jan has presented 'preconception' and 'wellness' workshops and seminars to the general public and health professionals around Australia and NZ since 1987. She has made frequent appearances on radio and TV and is a regular contributor to various magazines and journals.

