

Menopause

Chinese Medicine considers the time around menopause as a transition into a new phase of life for women — as a “second spring”—when the energy that a woman’s body has devoted to menstruation and reproduction can now be channelled into other creative areas of her life.

Many women are concerned about the risk factors associated with taking hormone therapy (HT). Chinese medicine has a 2000 year history of treating women’s hormonal conditions and offers a natural, safe alternative for relief of symptoms like sleep disturbance, weight gain and hot flashes.

What is menopause and perimenopause?

Menopause: Menopause is a natural part of a woman’s life. It is defined when a year has passed since the final menstrual period. The average age of menopause in western countries is approximately 51, however, menopause can occur at any point between your 30’s and your 60’s. When menopause happens at a young age it is commonly called early menopause. Low levels of both estrogen and progesterone are normal after menopause.

Perimenopause: is the period of time before and for a year after the final menstrual period when your ovarian hormonal pattern is in flux. Perimenopause may begin five to ten years *before* menopause. It’s characterized by high and wildly fluctuating levels of estrogen and declining progesterone. Many perimenopausal symptoms are believed to be the result of this imbalance between estrogen and progesterone

What are the symptoms of perimenopause?

While some women sail through this transition, others suffer from a number of distressing symptoms including:

- Hot flashes, night sweats
- Sleep disorders such as insomnia, difficulty falling asleep, waking up frequently, or restless sleep
- Mood swings, irritability, depression, anxiety, or nervousness
- Decreased libido, lack of sexual desire vaginal dryness

- Menstrual cycle changes, including heavier periods, uterine fibroids, spotting between periods, or skipped cycles, as well as worsening PMS (premenstrual syndrome)
- Fuzzy thinking, decreased or impaired memory and attention
- Increased food cravings, stubborn weight gain, insulin resistance and difficulty controlling blood sugar
- Digestive problems, such as irritable bowel, bloating, or acid reflux
- Cardiac complaints, such as heart arrhythmia, chest pain, palpitations, or heart disease and stroke
- Joint and muscle symptoms, including inflammation, stiffness or pain
- Dizziness, decreased balance, headaches or menstrual migraines
- Breast tenderness, breast cysts, or nipple discharge
- Hair loss; unwanted facial hair growth; dry eyes, skin, or hair; midlife acne
- Pelvic or urinary complaints, including urinary incontinence urinary tract infections (UTI's), pelvic prolapse,
- Increased allergies and sensitivities, hives

In Chinese Medicine we believe that these symptoms are not inevitable but signs of imbalance. The extent of your symptoms has a lot to do with your basic health before and during perimenopause. If you are overworked, not getting enough rest, eating a diet which produces inflammation, and suffering from anxiety and worry, you will likely have more severe symptoms. In addition we are increasingly exposed to environmental toxins and endocrine disruptors which aggravate hormonal imbalances. The healthier and more balanced you are the smoother the transition can be.

Treatment approach: how to naturally relieve symptoms and optimize your health

Rather than trying to restore your hormones to the levels they were in your 20s or 30s, Chinese medicine works to smooth your transition by nourishing your organ systems and bringing your body into balance with **acupuncture, herbal formulas, lifestyle changes** and **diet**.

Your Acubalance practitioner will do a thorough evaluation in order to diagnose your own particular pattern and come up with a treatment plan. Your personal treatment plan would typically include acupuncture and herbal therapy designed to treat your specific imbalance. In addition your practitioner can provide coaching on ways you can take charge of your own health and wellbeing.

What are bioidentical hormones?

Bioidentical hormones have captured the headlines lately with celebrities like Suzanne Summers and Oprah promoting their benefit. At Acubalance we do not prescribe hormone therapy but instead compound a herbal formula that gently brings your hormones back into natural balance. For more information on bioidentical hormones go to www.cemcor.ubc.ca and www.healthyimmunity.com

Bioidentical hormones generally refer to supplements of estrogen, progesterone or testosterone that are chemically identical to the body's own hormones. They're usually derived from plant sources, such as Mexican wild yam and soy. Synthetic hormones, on the other hand, are derived from substances like the urine of pregnant horses and are molecularly different to a woman's own hormones.

The term natural or bioidentical is a bit misleading, however, as all hormones whether from plants or animals, must be synthesized in a lab to make them usable by the body.

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the practice of inserting hair thin needles into certain points to relieve symptoms by promoting health and balance. According to Chinese medicine, acupuncture stimulates the flow of energy or Qi, (pronounced "chee") through the body that is vital for overall health.

Acupuncture has been shown to be an effective treatment for hot flashes, sleep disturbances and anxiety.

How does acupuncture help perimenopause?

Acupuncture appears to bring your hormones into balance and reduce anxiety through a process called homeostatic regulation: buffering hormonal disturbance, modulating ovulation and stimulating feel good endorphins. Studies have shown that acupuncture can balance blood concentrations of estrogen, reduces LH and restore the number of gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) neurons. Acupuncture has been shown to improve the function of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis which is the mechanism responsible for balancing reproductive hormones.

Studies

Acupuncture plus self-care can contribute to a clinically relevant reduction in hot flashes and increased health-related quality of life in postmenopausal women. *Acupuncture plus lifestyle can help with menopausal symptoms* Posted: 12/03/2008; Menopause. 2008;15(6):1070-1078. © 2008 The North American Menopause Society

Acupuncture and Auricular Acupressure in Relieving Menopausal Hot Flashes of Bilaterally Ovariectomized Chinese Women: A Randomized Controlled Trial

Jue Zhou^{1,*}, Fan Qu^{2,*}, Xisheng Sang³, Xiaotong Wang⁴ and Rui Nan

Acupuncture and auricular acupressure significantly relieve the severity and frequency of menopausal hot flashes. Posted: 09/23/2009; Menopause. 2009;16(4):660-665. © 2009 The North American Menopause Society

Moxibustion improves menopausal hot flash symptoms in terms of both frequency and severity. *Moxibustion for Treating Menopausal Hot Flashes: A Randomized Clinical Trial* Ji-Eun Park, RN, BSc; Myeong Soo Lee, PhD; Soyoung Jung, BSc; Aeran Kim, BSc; Kyungwon Kang, MS; Junyong Choi, OMD, MS; Jongbae Park, KMD, PhD; Sun-Mi Choi, OMD, PhD

A Randomized, Controlled Pilot Study of Acupuncture Treatment for Menopausal Hot Flashes Nancy E. Avis, PhD; Claudine Legault, PhD; Remy R. Coeytaux, MD, PhD; May Pian-Smith, MD; Jan L. Shifren, MD; Wunian Chen, MD, LAc; Peter Valaskatgis, MAC

What is Chinese Herbal Medicine?

Herbal therapy is an important part of treatment in Chinese Medicine, and provides an essential compliment to acupuncture. While acupuncture stimulates the flow of energy and blood, herbal formulas are designed to correct deficiencies in the metabolic, endocrine and immune systems.

In Western medicine pharmaceutical drugs are prescribed to treat a specific disease. Chinese herbal formulas, however, are individually compounded for your particular underlying pattern. The formulas, which may contain a number of different herbs, generally include both herbs to increase general health and to deal with your specific ailment.

Chinese herbal formulas, which must be prescribed by your practitioner, lack the adverse effects of pharmaceutical drugs, when customized for each individual to treat their presenting pattern imbalance.

Studies have shown that herbal formulas may help treat many of the symptoms of menopause.

Studies

Menopause, Chinese Herb & Hormone levels

Herba Epimedii water extract produces its beneficial actions in postmenopausal women.
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18697183?itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed_ResultsPanel.Pubmed_RVDocSum&ordinalpos=31

Chinese Herbal Medicine vs. HRT This pilot study indicates TCM can be useful and effective at treating menopause.

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17689896?itool=EntrezSystem2.PEntrez.Pubmed.Pubmed_ResultsPanel.Pubmed_RVDocSum&ordinalpos=59

Natural Therapies: Lifestyle, Stress Reduction & Diet

Lifestyle: includes adequate rest, moderate exercise and sufficient sleep
Try a relaxing hobby—gardening knitting, painting journaling. Something that gives you pleasure and slows you to a healthy pace.

Start an exercise program if you don't have one. That can be as simple as an energetic 30 minute walk (break a sweat) once a day and incorporating small changes like taking the stairs instead of the elevator, parking farther from your destination. Taking up a new activity like a dancing, hiking or kayaking is a great way to boost your fitness level.

Make sure to get enough sleep. Sleep is restorative and can help you work out emotional stresses. In addition sufficient sleep actually reduces cortisol and insulin levels and helps you lose weight!

Stress reduction—deep relaxation: You need to have a time each day when your body experiences a state of deep relaxation. This helps you recharge your batteries and get your system back in balance. Meditation, yoga, visualization and Qi Gong are all ways of slowing your mind and body and achieving deep relaxation. Studies have shown that meditation can actually change your brain activity and thinking patterns.

There are lots of tapes on the market that can help you get started. [Jon Kabat Zinn's mindful based stress reduction program](#) is a great example of a deep relaxation technique. His book [Full Catastrophe Living](#) outlines the steps to stress reduction and has a meditation CD with it.

Diet *Those who take medicine and neglect their diets waste the skill of the physician -- Chinese Proverb--*



It's very frustrating! Fluctuating hormones make it more difficult to maintain a healthy weight during perimenopause yet studies have shown that women who have a higher BMI tend to have more severe vaso- motor symptoms (hot flashes heat palpitations and sleep disturbances).

A recent landmark study has shown that diet can have a powerful effect on reproductive hormones. Following a low GI, anti inflammatory, mostly plant-based diet, that focuses on whole foods, good fats, and a rainbow of fruits and vegetables may help you control your weight by balancing your hormones —as well as having an anti aging effect.