

GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE MENOPAUSE.

The menopause is not an illness, and does not necessarily have to be treated with drugs. Indeed in many other cultures, far fewer women suffer from the symptoms that are now commonplace and accepted in the West. Many women are prescribed HRT for these symptoms, but recent studies have produced worrying data about the risks of taking it.

What are the risks of HRT?

We've known for a long time that HRT increases the risk of breast cancer, but only recently has the evidence shown that some forms of HRT also increase the risk of heart attacks, blood clots and strokes.

A large American trial proved that for every 10,000 women taking HRT containing oestrogen and progesterone for one year there are: seven more heart attacks, eight more strokes, eight more breast cancers, eighteen more leg clots, six fewer bowel cancers and five fewer hip fractures than in 10,000 women not taking HRT.

What should I do if I have symptoms or am worried about HRT?

First, do not panic. If you decide to come off your HRT it is better to do this slowly under your doctors supervision. Go and discuss your concerns with your GP, who will assess your individual risk: benefit profile and advise you accordingly. This will depend on factors such as family history and personal medical history. However, in view of the risks outlined above there are now far fewer women for whom HRT is appropriate.

Are there any alternatives?

The good news is that there are alternatives! More and more women are realising that their symptoms can be controlled without HRT. The alternatives include lifestyle changes, dietary manipulation and taking nutritional supplements and herbs.

Lifestyle changes.

Exercise is extremely important at this time in life with benefits for your bones, emotional well being, heart and hormones to name a few! Remember it needs to be weight-bearing exercise such as walking to benefit bones.

Not smoking is another crucial lifestyle change you can make to reduce the risk of osteoporosis in particular, as well as improve your general health.

Mental well-being is so often overlooked, but reducing stress levels with some relaxation, meditation or yoga will help you through this transition.

Remember that stress and excess heat may trigger hot flushes.

Dietary changes.

A good diet is very important at the menopause to help the body to adjust to the changes and keep hormones in balance. Incorporating soy into your diet has been shown by numerous trials, to be beneficial for symptom relief and bone preservation. Soy contains isoflavones, which are a type of naturally occurring oestrogen. Sources include soymilk, tofu, and miso. There are also soy supplements available; these should only be taken for six months at a time.

Other foods to increase include lentils, flaxseeds (as seeds or oil), chick peas (hummus), oily fish, nuts, seeds, fruit and vegetables. Drinking plenty of water is also essential.

Foods to avoid or minimise include sugar and artificial sweeteners, alcohol, caffeine, margarine and salt. Hot drinks and spicy food can also trigger hot flushes.

Nutritional Supplements.

Many people argue that we should be able to get all our nutritional requirements from our diet. However many health professionals believe that this is not the case and there is a lot of evidence supporting the use of supplements for health problems.

A whole range of nutrients has been shown to be beneficial for menopausal symptoms, and the choice will depend on a woman's specific symptoms. The most frequently used ones are the B vitamins, vitamin C with bioflavonoids, vitamin E, essential fatty acids, magnesium and calcium. There are "multis" available combining

these tailor made for the menopause, but in many cases it can also be beneficial to take supplements specifically tailored to your individual symptoms.

Herbs.

Herbs can be very potent and should be treated with respect. They should not be taken at the same time as HRT, the pill or fertility treatment. If you are on any medication then you should check with your GP before starting them.

The herbs suggested are called “adaptogenic” which means they have a balancing effect on the body, thus allowing it to restore itself naturally.

Two of the most popular ones for the menopause are agnus castus and black cohosh. Agnus castus (vitex) is a potent remedy for hot flushes, as well as restoring hormonal balance.

Black Cohosh (cimicifuga racemosa) also relieves hot flushes, as well as sleep disturbance. It is the most studied herbal supplement for menopausal symptoms.

Don't take it if you are allergic to aspirin or have high blood pressure. It should be taken for six months and then you or a health professional should assess whether you need to continue with it.

As you can see there are plenty of other options for the relief of menopausal symptoms, and it is not a case of taking HRT or having to live with them. Women can now take control of their symptoms and their lives naturally and safely, and I believe that is good news for women's health!