

TEN TIPS TO GETTING THROUGH MENOPAUSE

By E. Conrad Hicks, Jr., M.D. and Valerie Otto

The generation of women entering menopause is healthier, feels younger than their years, and lead more active lives and careers than previous generations. However, there is also no doubt that for many women, this can be an uncomfortable and confusing time—plagued with hot flashes, irritability, headaches, depression, sleepless nights, and fatigue, as well as waning libido and decreased ability to enjoy sex.

Following are ten important suggestions to help you embrace rather than dread this time in your life.

There's no reason to suffer—If you are a woman, most likely you will spend a third of your life peri-menopausal or post-menopausal. Considering how much you've been through in your life, there is no reason to “tough out” the discomforts of menopause. Americans think it is normal and responsible to take various medicines for arthritis pain, cardiac and vascular disease, and diabetes. So why not also evaluate and/or treat the symptoms and changes that come with menopause? There are plenty of options available now besides hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and physicians are now embracing integrated medicine to accomplish what works best for each individual woman, whether it includes HRT or not. One of the newer products they are recommending is Oöna, an herbal supplement that combines black cohosh and chaste tree berry.

There is no “right” way, just “your” way—You may believe that HRT is either the “fountain of youth” or the “fountain of evil.” Truthfully, it's neither. Become informed about all the options available and consult your doctor. With an open mind and effective communication, you and your doctor will find what works best for you. There are several integrated approaches including conventional pharmaceutical preparations, herbs, acupuncture, and meditation, etc. that many women have had success with.

Update your Vitamin Regime -- If you have been taking the same multivitamin for years, now is the time to review the label. Women in midlife have different needs and should take at least 400 IUs of vitamin E (take these in 200 IU intervals), 400 mcg of folic acid, 100 mg of vitamin B6, 1250-1500 mg of calcium with 500 mg of magnesium, 200-1200 IUs of vitamin D, and 1,000-5000 mg of vitamin C with Rose Hips. Omega 3 essential fatty acids are also very important and can be found in cod liver oil pills and flaxseed.

Hormones are affected by stress and what we eat—As production of estrogen, progesterone and testosterone by the ovaries declines, the adrenal glands, muscles and brain begin to produce an increasing percentage of the body's androgen hormones and convert them to weaker estrogens. A healthy diet and positive attitude have been shown to help this conversion. Also, symptoms of menopause are known to have “triggers” such as alcohol, caffeine, sugar and spicy foods, which you should eliminate or cut back on. Starches should

come from darker whole breads, grains and vegetables. It's also a good idea to eliminate, or deal with, as much stress as possible since most women feel either a greater number of menopausal symptoms or feel them with greater intensity when they are under stress.

There is usually more than a hormonal shift—Often there is an accompanying emotional shift. As Christiane Northrup, M.D. points out; it is characteristic of women to focus much of their energy during the child-bearing years on caring for others. As they move toward menopause, the focus commonly turns inwards to caring for themselves. Women often re-evaluate their lives and their relationships, looking for the understanding, support and the encouragement they feel they've been giving others for so many years. Make sure that you are not asking someone to read your mind, but rather take care in how you express yourself. If need be, consult a therapist.

Diet, making the best of the four-letter word – You may feel that your eating habits have not changed or that you're even eating less, but find yourself gaining weight. In mid-life women experience a 10-15% metabolic rate slowdown, their bodies become more efficient at storing energy as fat, and as estrogen levels fall, appetite increases. After menopause this weight usually goes away as metabolism re-stabilizes, but in the meantime, keeping blood sugar level during the day by eating small meals tends to help most menopausal women. The key is not to overeat at night as metabolism peaks earlier in the day, and to cut down on carbohydrates, and have protein with each meal.

Exercise makes every list —Regular aerobic exercise can help ease menopausal symptoms, maintain or optimize heart health and maintain metabolic rate. A program of weight or resistance training will help maintain bone strength. There are so many different ways to exercise nowadays; from tai-chi to spin, the key is to find one or two that you enjoy.

Hormones and the Libido—A deficiency in estrogen or progesterone can cause changes such as vaginal dryness and thinning of the vaginal wall, making sex less pleasurable and even painful. Testosterone levels also fall during the menopausal transition and can contribute to a decreased sex drive, decreased energy and a decreased “overall sense of well-being.” Most physicians will prescribe an estriol cream for the vaginal dryness and thinning of the wall. Similarly if low testosterone levels are detected, supplementation to normal levels is easy to achieve. Additionally, the combination of the herbs black cohosh and chaste tree berry found in Oöna will also help with vaginal dryness and thinning vaginal walls.

You can keep your skin radiant—First, if you smoke, here's another reason to quit. Smoking damages your skin and most smokers see wrinkles earlier in life. (Smokers will also enter menopause earlier.) Make sure you use a face cleanser that is cream based, since soap or gel cleansers tend to dry out middle-age skin. Exfoliate once a week and mask once a week (not on the same day). Finally, supplement with omega 3 fats like flaxseed oil, cod liver oil and/or primrose oil. Vitamins C and E are also very important, as is coenzyme Q10. Water and fiber are also very important for your skin and body.

Keeping your mind sharp and heart strong— The more the link between estrogen and cardiovascular disease is investigated, the more apparent it becomes that the cardiovascular protection estrogen has been thought to offer may not apply to everyone, and in fact, should not be given to women with a history of cardiovascular disease. As for the mind, it is difficult to determine if a woman’s feelings of “scatteredness and forgetfulness” are caused by hormones as opposed to stress or aging. It is still unknown whether there is any connection between estrogen and Alzheimer’s, but it does appear that a minimum amount of estrogens are essential for certain memory functions. Also, good health habits have been tied to improved memory function. Eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day, supplement with B-vitamins, E and zinc, and get plenty of antioxidants such as vitamin C. Ginkgo Biloba can also help, but it’s important to choose a reliable brand and look for standardized extracts.

Whether you are symptomatic or not, menopause is a great reminder to take a serious look at your health. As modern medicine has now extended our life span to almost twice what it used to be, our bodies undergo profound physiologic changes. The importance of the mind-body connection cannot be underestimated, and choosing to deal with what ails you is a big first step. Find an approach to menopausal symptoms that you are comfortable with and works for you, and you can begin to spend this time focusing on the positive aspects of this transitional time, instead of suffering unnecessarily. This is an opportunity to make adjustments that could ensure that the years to come are most enjoyable. You’ve earned it.

Dr. Hicks is a board certified Obstetrician-Gynecologist and a fellow in the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology who focuses significantly on menopause and therapies for relieving menopausal symptoms. Practicing at Northeast OB-GYN in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Dr. Hicks’ experience is not linked solely to clinical experience, but also to teaching experience. He often speaks publicly to audiences who are interested in learning more about menopause.

Valerie Otto has long been involved in issues of women’s health and well-being. The company she founded Oöna Health, offers an effective, natural alternative to hormone replacement therapy for women experiencing menopause.

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