



Common Questions About: **MENOPAUSE**

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By Michael T. Murray, N.D.

What is menopause?

Menopause is a normal physiological event most women go through during middle age. By the time a woman is 45 years old, about 450 of her ovarian follicles have ripened and ovulated. Only a few are left to secrete estrogens and progesterone. Over the next months or years, these too will be used up, until her production of feminizing hormones is essentially zero, and her two ovaries have ceased to function as active glands.

As her monthly cycles come to an end, a woman's body attempts to adjust to the radical change in its hormonal environment. She may suffer from "hot flashes" (flushing, sweating, etc. during the day and at night), irritability, fatigue, anxiety, and depression. Other menopausal symptoms include vaginal atrophy and osteoporosis.

Menopause can occur earlier in life as a result of infection, surgery, or radiation therapy for cancer.

What about estrogen therapy for menopausal symptoms?

The use of estrogens to reduce menopausal symptoms is a popular prescription, but it does have its risks. Estrogen therapy should be reserved for women who are at high risk for developing osteoporosis

Estrogen therapy is absolutely not recommended in women with a history of breast cancer, liver disease, and thrombosis. Estrogen therapy is also not recommended in women with high blood pressure fibrocystic breasts, elevated cholesterol levels, migraine headaches, and endometriosis.

What are the risks of estrogen therapy?

The most serious risk: cancer. Estrogen therapy is associated with an increased risk for endometrial cancer and breast cancer. Women taking estrogen are also at risk for developing gall bladder disease and possibly strokes, heart attacks, and high blood pressure.

What about a natural alternative to estrogen therapy?

A variety of natural factors can ease the female body's transition into menopause. The most popular natural approach involves the use of herbs with a historical use as "tonics" to the female glandular system.

Angelica sinensis (Dong quai), Glycyrrhiza glabra (licorice root), Alettris farinosa (unicorn root), Cimiefuga racemosa (black cohosh), Foenicu-lum vulgare (fennel), and Helonias opulus (false



unicorn root) are examples of uterine tonics. These herbs are used primarily to lessen symptoms of menopause, although they have also been used in improving menstrual function.

How do plants help alleviate menopausal symptoms?

Most of the plants listed above contain natural estrogenic substances called "phytoestrogens." These compounds exert estrogenic effects, although the activity compared to estrogen is quite mild only 1 /400th as potent.

Researchers believe phytoestrogens exert a balancing effect on female hormone levels. For example, if estrogen levels are low, they will cause an increase in overall estrogen effect. And, if estrogen levels are high, phytoestrogens can bind to estrogen receptor sites, thereby competing with estrogen and decreasing its effects.

Because of this balancing action, the same plant may be recommended for conditions of estrogen excess (like the premenstrual syndrome) as well as conditions of estrogen deficiency (like menopause and menstrual



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abnormalities). In addition, several of these herbs, most notably Dong quai exert an effect on the vascular system. This is extremely useful in reducing both the frequency and intensity of hot flashes and night sweats.

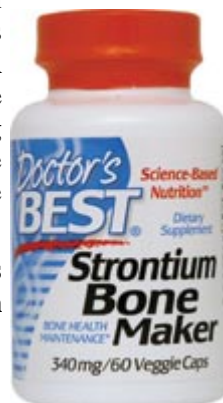
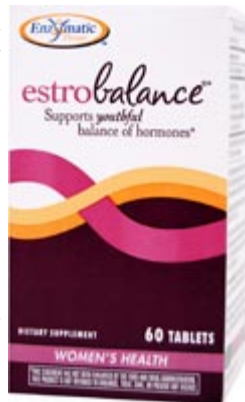
What about the risk of developing osteoporosis?

A. Osteoporosis is a real risk in postmenopausal women. A great deal of research indicates that osteoporosis can be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle, including proper diet and exercise.

The major risk factors for osteoporosis include: fair skin; slight build; positive family history; early menopause; cigarette smoking; steroid therapy; high alcohol intake; and a sedentary lifestyle. Your health care practitioner may be able to help in evaluating your risk of developing osteoporosis by taking a detailed medical history and performing appropriate tests.

Current medical treatment employs estrogen therapy and calcium supplementation. Although this combined approach is helpful in many cases, its success is limited. A comprehensive approach involving dietary and lifestyle changes would be much more prudent.

How can osteoporosis be prevented in menopausal women?



A. Coffee, alcohol and smoking should be eliminated, because they induce a negative calcium balance, associated with an increased risk of developing osteoporosis. Studies show one hour of moderate physical activity three times a week helps prevent bone loss and can actually increase bone mass in postmenopausal women. Walking may be the best exercise to start with

Calcium supplementation is important. Many experts are recommending a daily calcium intake of 1,500 milligrams. Those who wish to supplement the diet should choose a form of calcium that is easily absorbed and utilized by the body. Although calcium hydroxyapatite (bone meal) is promoted as a good calcium supplement, scientific evidence indicates

it is poorly absorbed compared to other forms of calcium. Calcium chelated to lactate or the Krebs cycle intermediates (citrate, malate, succinate, fumarate and aspartate) are better absorbed; therefore, they may provide the best forms of calcium supplementation.

Other nutrients, such as vitamin K, magnesium, vitamin D, folic acid, manganese, boron, strontium, silicon, and several others, also play key roles in bone health. For more information, request a free reprint of *Nutrients and Bone Health*, available from the Wright/Gaby Nutrition Institute, P.O. Box 21535, Baltimore, MD 21208. Also available at your local Health Food Store.



What type of diet should menopausal women consume?

A diet high in vegetables and fruits, but low in fat and animal products, is recommended. Refined carbohydrate and alcohol intake should be limited, and carbonated beverages loaded with phosphates should be completely eliminated, because these foods will deplete the body of calcium and other minerals.

Summary

Menopause is a natural event associated with a loss of menstruation, increased risk for osteoporosis, and vaginal atrophy. Menopausal women commonly receive estrogens to help allay the hot flashes, nausea, bone loss and other symptoms caused by the decrease in the body's own hormone levels. A natural approach involving the use of phytoestrogens, healthy diet, and lifestyle changes offers similar benefits in alleviating symptoms of menopause, without causing the side effects often associated with estrogen therapy.

Herbs like Dong quai provide natural compounds that can help alleviate menopausal hot flashes.

