

Important Information about Menopause and Perimenopaus

The term "**menopause**" comes from two Greek words that mean "month" and "to end." It translates as "the end of the monthlies." The medical definition of menopause is the absence of menstruation for 12 months. In American women, the average age for menopause is 51, which means menopause can occur between a woman's late thirties and her late 50's. It also occurs when a woman's uterus and ovaries are surgically removed. **Perimenopause** is the two to fifteen year span before menopause during which a woman experiences changes due to declining levels of estrogen and progesterone. For some women, the perimenopausal time can be more troubling than actual menopause.

Symptoms and Conditions

Symptoms of menopause and perimenopause vary greatly from woman to woman. In most women, menstruation becomes less and less regular for several months or years before ending. Symptoms are brought on as the body tries to adapt to a decreasing amount of estrogen. During true menopause, estrogen and progesterone levels are low and fairly constant. However, during the perimenopausal period these levels may fluctuate. Some perimenopausal women have an exacerbation of their premenstrual symptoms (PMS). Fortunately, when menopause occurs, the PMS symptoms cease.

Hot flashes and night sweats are experienced by up to 70-85% of perimenopausal women. Hot flashes can be very mild or severe enough to result in sleep deprivation or depression. They begin as a sudden feeling of warmth that sometimes becomes an intense heat over the face, scalp, and chest area. A woman may perspire profusely and sometimes feel a cold chill afterwards. It is thought that falling levels of estrogen cause the brain to release a surge of Gonadotropin-releasing hormone causing a woman to suddenly feel hot. Usually, hot flashes go away a year or two after actual menopause.

Mood changes and irritability: this may be more common in women who have had difficulty with PMS. There is some suggestion that estrogen levels influence the production of serotonin.

Difficulty with memory and attention span: some women report difficulty with concentrating or remembering specific words. A woman with attention deficit disorder may first come for treatment at this age because declining estrogen levels have exacerbated her ability to concentrate.

Insomnia is a common complaint of women in perimenopause or menopause. Night sweats may disrupt sleep. Irritability and depression can impair sleep. Reduced sleep can lead to tiredness and irritability during the day.

Vaginal dryness: before and after menopause. Lowered estrogen levels cause the lining of the vagina to become dryer and thinner. This may lead to painful intercourse and decreased interest in sexual relations.

Urinary leakage: some symptoms may be related to pelvic floor changes that occurred years ago during labor and delivery. As the estrogen level drops, further changes can occur. Low estrogen levels may weaken the urethral sphincter that helps hold urine. If the woman has gained weight, it may put more strain on the bladder.

Menses changes: including cycle, duration, quality, color and blood flow, etc.

Other symptoms not included above but can also be signs of menopause or perimenopause are:

- Heart palpitations
- Migraine headaches
- Breast swelling and tenderness
- Menstrual cycle changes
- Fibroids
- Loss of sexual drive
- Change in skin tone, texture, and elasticity
- Weight gain
- Bone loss

Pros and Cons of HRT

The one solution that western medicine gives for the relief of symptoms for menopause is the much debated Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). While HRT may alleviate hot flashes and prevent osteoporosis, they may also increase the risk of breast, ovarian and uterine cancer, and have a number of significant side-effects. But HRT isn't the only solution. Menopause is an area in which Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) shines. TCM has the ability to detect energetic changes in the body and quickly relieve symptoms such as the ones listed above.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE DIAGNOSIS

According to Chinese Medical Theory, menopause occurs when a woman's body begins to preserve blood and energy in order to sustain her vitality and allows for the maximum available nourishment for her body. In TCM, the core source of menopausal symptoms is "kidney" deficiency. Kidney energy is the main source of energy and vitality, and is involved with the endocrine, reproductive, and urinary systems. A deficiency of kidney energy causes an imbalance of yin and yang resulting in the dysfunction of the systems. When the female hormone level is out of balance, the endocrine system becomes dysfunctional.

TCM treats each woman individually, taking into account the whole pattern of each patient's physical, mental, and emotional symptoms. There are many advantages to the use of TCM during and prior to menopause along with a variety of other women's health conditions.