

# Treat menopause as a life process, not disease

BY CHARLENE BALDRIDGE  
SPECIAL WRITER

Alarmed by reports about the side effects of estrogen and hormone replacement therapies, or perhaps finding themselves in a category that precludes their use, many women are choosing to go through the "change of life" naturally.

Instead of thinking of menopause as some kind of disease that needs to be treated medically, they are accepting it as a natural life process. They're using natural means, alternative medicine and the help of other women to cope with some of its side effects.

Beyond the use of the battery-powered hot-flash fan/spritzer combination I once observed - it works - there are many avenues to relief but, first, let's examine exactly what happens to women in menopause, physiologically and emotionally.

Biologically, the word "menopause" refers to the date of a woman's final menstrual period. All that comes before is termed the climacteric. It is that entire period of 10 to 15 years during which we go from having a regular menstrual cycle to not having one at all. During this time, the ovaries gradually cease producing eggs and large amounts of hormones. The average age of menopause is between 50 and 51.

The peri-menopausal period lasts about four years, from two years before to two years after the final menstrual period. This is the time in which the greatest number of physical changes

take place.

Early menopause can be caused by a number of factors, such as surgical removal of the ovaries, radiation therapy, tubal ligation, mumps and autoimmune reaction.

"What happens at menopause to bring the menstrual cycle to a final, if somewhat bumpy, halt?" ask Kate O'Hanlan, M.D., and Susan Perry in their excellent book titled "Natural Menopause" (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co. Inc.). "Scientists are not sure about all the complex factors involved, but the most important one is quite simple: the ovaries simply run out of eggs."

Hormone and estrogen replacement therapies are frequently used to replenish hormones and relieve symptoms of peri- and post-menopause. Studies continue to indicate that such therapies help to prevent osteoporosis (hormone depletion contributes to bone loss) and heart disease. But studies also indicate they may increase the odds of breast and cervical cancer. For this reason, HRT and ERT are not recommended for women with genetic predisposition for these diseases.

There's good news for women genetically predisposed to osteoporosis: Two new drugs have been approved. One, Fosamax, has been shown by studies to increase bone density.

In addition to the physical changes that occur during climacteric, most women experience emotional changes as well. In the May issue of American Health for Women, writer Lori Miller

Kase led off an article about mood changes and hormones with the following: "Scientists now know that PMS, postpartum depression and perimenopausal agitation are biologically based." This once again sets off the decades-old battle between physicians, psychiatrists and feminists.

"Critics of the hormone-mental health connection ... insist that linking hormones to behavior creates a misperception that women are ruled by their emotions, not their heads," writes Kase. "We've worked too hard to prove we are capable to allow the pendulum to swing back in the other direction."


In addition to the physical changes surrounding menopause, the years during which they take place are fraught with other stress-inducing life and social changes. For instance, our career demands may be at an all-time high; the children leave for college; we are widowed, or our husband leaves us for a younger woman; our parents become infirm and/or die.

What can we do to relieve stress, and what resources are there for women who choose to combat hot flashes, hormone loss and menopausal changes naturally?

## DOWN WITH HOT FLASHES

According to most studies, up to 85 percent of women experience hot flashes. Hot flashes are caused by changes in the hypothalamus, a gland that regulates not only body temperature but the monthly fluctuations of one's sex hormones as well. The hypothalamic

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