



# MENOPAUSE — don't sweat it

By Lesa Knollenberg

Into each woman's life, a little estrogen must fall. During menopause, fluctuating levels of hormones cause a surfeit of symptoms; this occurs naturally or can be forced by surgery. Although menopause is a natural transition in a woman's life, its effects can be life-altering. The symptoms of menopause and perimenopause (the years preceding menopause) are like a buffet of discomfort:

- Insomnia
- Unpredictable periods
- Abnormal or heavy bleeding
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Mood swings
- Decreased libido and lubrication
- Difficulty concentrating
- Osteoporosis
- Increased risk of heart disease

Whether you walk away with a plate of severe symptoms that alter your quality of life — or just a few symptoms that are manageable but annoying, there are a few insights to keep in mind.

## Oprah makes mistakes, too.

If symptoms are affecting your daily life, the most effective treatment is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). HRT can "re-balance hormone changes during menopause," says Marta Staple, a certified nurse practitioner with Meriter's WomanCare Clinic. She explains that there are three formulations of estrogen HRT available to manage the symptoms of menopause:

- Synthetic estrogen — chemically derived, not molecularly identical to human hormones, well studied.
- Bio-identical estrogen — plant derived but chemically purified, molecularly identical to human hormones, poorly studied.
- Compounded bio-identical estrogen — similar to bio-identical, but doses are

altered for individual clients' systems, poorly studied and unregulated.

Suzanne Somers recently caused a whirlwind of controversy with an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." She touted compounded bio-identical estrogen as a panacea for all menopausal symptoms and suggested that women take higher doses for a much longer time than recommended. Winfrey has been criticized for appearing to endorse the unregulated compounded bio-identical hormones, rather than simply representing the options fairly.

Here's the upshot: It's an individual choice. For those with severe symptoms, HRT is a gift. But there are risks involved with all estrogen therapy. Educate yourself on the balance of benefit and risks for each type of HRT and discuss with your health care provider.

## You don't have to sweat it alone.

If HRT isn't for you, there are alternatives. Start with lifestyle changes, such as exercise and strength training. Many women find comfort in alternative therapies, such as massage, acupuncture, herbal supplements and meditation. Your health care provider may offer other remedies, as well. For example:

- If abnormal or heavy bleeding is a problem, a procedure called endometrial ablation eliminates the uterine lining and reduces bleeding.
- Topical estrogen can ease symptoms of vaginal dryness.
- If night sweats or hot flashes are becoming unbearable, a low dosage of certain anti-depressants, blood pressure medicine or anti-seizure medicine can significantly reduce the heat.

According to Dean Health System's Dr. Alice Haupt, "the most effective treatment for managing hot flashes is estrogen; however, when a woman is unable or chooses not to take HRT, selective serotonin reuptake

inhibitors and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (anti-depressants) as well as gabapentin (anti-seizure medicine) are beneficial. Although many women use soy and herbal products like black cohosh, most studies do not support that these therapies are more efficacious than placebo."

Trust your health care provider as your partner to navigate your unique menopause experience; don't suffer silently.

## Finally! Fat has a job!

The good news is that menopausal symptoms DO END. According to Staple, "After about five years post-menopause, symptoms of menopause improve. Ninety-five percent of women suffering symptoms have complete resolution post-menopause."

Also, a little extra frosting on the cake: Symptoms end a bit sooner if you're carrying around some body fat. Eventually our body fat starts creating its own estrogen. Women who aren't rail-thin make more post-menopausal estrogen.

More good news: Menopause can be a chance to refocus. Armed with education, a good health care provider and an open mind, menopause can literally be a "pause." It's important to pause to take care of yourself and appreciate the way your body has supported you over the years.



Dr. Alice Haupt  
Dean Health System



Lesla "Perimenopause" Knollenberg is a local freelance writer who wonders "Is it hot in here? Or is it just me?"