

## Easing Menopause

by Susan Gins, MS, CN

Hot flashes, night sweats, weight gain, mood swings, irritability, depression and memory loss are some signals that a woman's body is undergoing change. Other symptoms that may not individually signal biological transformation include sleep deprivation, decreased vaginal lubrication and thinning vaginal mucosa, insomnia, urinary incontinence, loss of libido and changes in the skin. However, any one or a combination of these symptoms, together with a woman's age, suggest that menopause is at hand.

Most women do not suffer from all of these symptoms and can actively participate in reducing the things that do bother them. Diet, exercise, stress reduction, vitamins, minerals and herbs can all positively affect the transition from child-bearing years to non-child-bearing years. Preparation prior to entering menopause can greatly reduce suffering, and dietary choices are a prime element of control.

Menopause, cessation of the menstrual cycle for one year, consists of four stages: pre-menopausal, peri-menopausal, menopausal and post-menopausal. In the peri-menopausal phase, women first start to notice differences in their cycles, such as shortening or lengthening of periods, and lighter or heavier flow. Caused by sharp drops in the level of the hormone estrogen produced in the body, these and the above mentioned symptoms of menopause diminish as one progresses to the post-menopause stage.

Isoflavones are plant based "phytoestrogens" ("phyto" refers to plants), phytochemicals that bind with estrogen receptor cells. They help supply the body with a compound similar to estrogen. Having a reliable plant source of phytoestrogens is especially helpful in lessening hot flashes and night sweats. Soy foods are a major source of isoflavones and by increasing your intake of soy products, your body continues to have a reliable source of these valuable compounds. By providing yourself with food that helps diminish the effect of lower estrogen production in your body, you may help lessen the symptoms caused by less internally produced estrogen.

Flax seeds are another important source of naturally occurring phytoestrogens. Sprinkle ground flax meal on cereal, salads and vegetables to increase your phytoestrogen supply. You can purchase ground flax seeds or grind your own in an inexpensive coffee grinder. Flaxseed oil is a supplement that helps lubricate dry skin and supplies essential fatty acids that can help improve memory. Memory lapses seem to be most acute during the years prior to period cessation and improve when a woman reaches the post-menopausal stage.

Many important vitamins and minerals reduce symptoms and help ensure future good health. These include the antioxidants "A.C.E.S.": beta-carotene, vitamin C, vitamin E and selenium. A variety of fruits and vegetables in your diet assures a steady supply of these important nutrients. Eat from the rainbow and vary your color palate to get everything you need (orange/carrots, green/spinach, blue/berrries). Buy organically grown produce to eliminate peripheral substances that can increase symptoms in women sensitive to artificial chemicals used in fertilization,

production and preservation of non-organic foods. New testing shows that organic vegetables and fruits are high in many important elements of a healthy diet.

Eliminating or reducing certain lifestyle factors can contribute to an easier menopause. Limit the amount of caffeine, alcohol and soda in the diet to help reduce unpleasant symptoms. Some women find that spicy food increases hot flashes. Caffeine and smoking increase metabolic rates, thereby increasing night sweats and hot flashes. Caffeine intake can diminish sleeping and adrenal function, leading to increased depression and fatigue. Drinking eight glasses of purified water daily can help increase mental sharpness, energy, reduce weight gain and cool the body.

Estrogen is stored in your fat cells, so your body fights to hold onto 10 pounds as a supply of estrogen. Do not be discouraged by this. When you reach the post menopause phase, this weight will be much easier to lose with proper diet and exercise. Remember this is your body's way of supporting you during this time. As long as you don't gain more weight, you can return to your pre-menopausal weight with ease. Exercise remains a crucial component for good mental health, stress management, bone health and weight loss at this time.

*To find out about the author, please see "About the Contributors" on pages 181-183.*

*"Studies have shown that populations that eat a diet high in vegetables and fruit and low in animal fat and meat... have a reduced risk of some of the more common cancers."*

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