

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES FOR MENOPAUSE

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Due to the recent negative publicity, many women are searching for alternatives to traditional hormone prescriptions for treatment of menopausal symptoms. First, we should be clear that the study that received all the negative publicity was done with Prempro, a prescription medicine containing estrogen compounds obtained from pregnant horses and an artificial progesterone derivative. Many practitioners feel that the use of more “natural” hormones, more properly referred to as “bio-identical” since they are the exact same compounds found in a women’s body but derived from plants, will likely be shown to be safer although no studies have been done to prove this. These compounds are now available in a number of forms including some standard as well as customized preparations from a compounding pharmacy but all need a doctor’s prescription. It is almost impossible for a woman who has been on hormone therapy to suddenly stop without debilitating symptoms, so I recommend using these more natural preparations as a transition while trying to restore the body to a healthier state so that, ultimately, hormones are not needed. How is that done?

According to the experience of many alternative practitioners, which is backed up by a number of ancient schools of medicine, the reason that a woman has problems during menopause at all ultimately relates to the health of the adrenal glands. These are small glands that sit on the top of each kidney that produce the major hormones our body needs to adapt to stress. They can also produce all of our sex hormones and help supplement the function of our primary sex organs. Under ideal situations, as ovary function declines at menopause, the adrenal glands should be able to pick up the slack and produce enough sex hormones for healthy body functioning. If, however, they are too overtaxed by the need to produce stress hormones, they will not have enough reserve to produce the extra sex hormones required. This situation is commonly referred to as “adrenal burnout,” although it is not severe enough to show up on medical testing as adrenal failure but is more of a functional inadequacy to meet an individual’s needs. What causes adrenal burnout? The standard American way of life including meals high in processed carbohydrates and sugar, insufficient sleep, skipping meals, chronic emotional stress, chronic dieting and over-exercising.

In the long run, rehabilitating burned out adrenals is the best way to both prevent and treat menopausal symptoms. This is done by: 1) getting at least 8 hours of good sleep a night, 2) avoiding processed food and focusing on whole foods, and 3) managing your stress by adapting your lifestyle to one that supports and nourishes you both at home and at work. Anyone who has hypoglycemia problems, as in those who become irritable and get headaches quickly if they don’t eat, are already showing signs of adrenal burnout and should eat 4-5 meals a day. This should entail 3 somewhat smaller main meals and 1-2 snacks, all with some protein, good fat, a non-starchy vegetable, and a lower glycemic carbohydrate such as a non-processed whole grain. I’m sorry, but there is no shortcut. The less you do these, the harder it will be to survive without hormone therapy. In my opinion, menopausal symptoms are a direct indicator of how well a woman is taking care of herself. In many human cultures throughout history, this was a time for a woman to retreat from the caretaker role to engage in more inwardly rewarding pursuits. It’s time for YOU!

Depending on how well or how poorly you have taken care of your adrenals in the 20-30 years prior to menopause, it can take anywhere from 6 months to several years to heal them. A number of nutritional and herbal preparations, including pantothenic acid, wild oats, the hormone precursor pregnenolone, licorice root, and Siberian or Asian ginseng, can help this process but should be taken under the supervision of someone knowledgeable in their

use. Some authorities feel that it is very difficult to heal adrenals without a transitional period on hormone replacement if you need it.

In the meantime, there are other compounds and herbal preparations that can help ease the symptoms of menopause, especially for milder symptoms. Most prominent is the herb black cohosh, sold as the product Remifemin. There is debate as to whether this works by an estrogen-type mechanism or not, although there is a lot of evidence that it does not. Until this is settled, however, it may be best to limit its use to 6 months, take progesterone along with it, and/or be monitored by a physician for overgrowth of the uterine lining. Many women get relief from progesterone creams alone as your body can theoretically make what estrogen it needs from the progesterone. Make sure to use a product with USP progesterone. If you are unsure, this can also be given by prescription. Do not use wild yam creams. The progesterone creams are made chemically from wild yams but your body cannot perform that conversion. Vitamin E taken 800 IU daily also has been found to be helpful for some women.