

BUSINESSWOMAN

Sailing through Menopause Without Hormone Replacement Therapy

— By Dr. Anita Chen Marshall, Pharm.D., L.Ac.

ARE YOU FACING A DECISION ABOUT HOW TO MANAGE the symptoms of menopause? You are not alone. Many experts believe that traditional Chinese medicine provides the best alternative treatment for women in transition through menopause.

According to the North American Menopause Society, there are more than 475 million menopausal women in the world, and approximately 1.5 million women in the United States reached menopause in the year 2000 alone. More than two-thirds of menopausal women in North America experience hot flashes. Other symptoms may include night sweats, lethargy, depression, anxiety, irritability, insomnia, poor memory and loss of concentration.

Western medicine views menopause as a disease condition caused by a lack of female hormones. For much of the past three decades, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) with synthetic or animal-derived hormones has been the treatment of choice. In fact, the National Women's Health Information Center reports that nearly 40 percent of women in the United States use HRT to relieve the unpleasant symptoms of menopause.

For years, HRT advocates suggested that taking hormones could also reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke and breast cancer as well as help maintain supple skin, improve bone density and prevent senile dementia. Now we know that the promises held

out for HRT were too good to be true. Two landmark studies by the Women's Health Initiative and the British government have shown that the risks of HRT may exceed its benefits. Therefore women are left with a dilemma — to live with the effects of menopause, to take a chance on HRT or to investigate other alternatives.

One excellent alternative comes from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). TCM uses acupuncture and herbs in a systematic approach that has been shown for two thousand years to avoid or diminish the symptoms of menopause without the use of hormones. From the TCM perspective, a woman's body goes through an enormous shift in energy before, during and after menopause.

If a woman has been healthy and in balance up to that point in her life, she may progress through menopause quickly, with only minor symptoms. But if her body has been out of balance for some reason, especially if she has had intense premenstrual syndrome, was infertile, has had a hysterectomy or other physical or emotional problems, going through menopause is likely to be more difficult. TCM can alleviate the symptoms by helping to rebal-

ance and harmonize the body, restore health and avoid later medical problems that may emerge if not addressed at this stage of life.

How Acupuncture Works

Chinese medicine has shown that there are Meridians, or pathways, between elements of the body through which the body's energy (known as Qi and pronounced "chee") should flow freely. Should the Qi become blocked due to physical or emotional stress, the energy becomes stagnant, which may lead to pain, irritability, anxiety, depression and other symptoms.

Acupuncture uses tiny needles inserted into points along the Meridians to unblock the Meridians, thus allowing for free flow of Qi and improvement of the symptoms that were caused by that energy stagnation.

Balancing Yin and Yang is another important concept in Chinese medicine. For example, TCM views hot flashes as a Yin deficiency condition. This results from the Yin (female/water) part of the body declining faster than the Yang (male/fire) part — as if there is not enough "water" to cool the "fire." Thus, hot flashes, which are often aggravated by stress, provide a signal that the Yin and Yang need rebalancing. By combining acupuncture with herbs and an improved diet, the enhanced flow of Qi throughout the body can lessen

hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms in as little as two weeks.

For example, a woman who had suffered from hot flashes and night sweats for years reported that after one acupuncture treatment and some Chinese herbal supplements, her symptoms had mostly subsided. She said she had not felt so well since before her symptoms began.

Herbal Supplements

In China, herbal formulas have been used for centuries for the treatment of menopausal syndromes. These formulas do not supply hormones, but rather act in combination to balance the body and improve the flow of Qi within the Meridians. To be safe and effective, herbs must be top quality and should be obtained from a licensed acupuncturist or herbalist. Helpful herbal supplements for reducing menopausal symptoms include Balance (Heat) and Calm from Evergreen Herbs, as well as Menopex and Hotflex from Harmonex, LLC.

Please note, however, that patients with estrogen-dependent cancers should not take herbs with estrogen-like effects.

Lifestyle Changes

Women should also prepare for the transition of menopause by reducing stress and

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conserving energy, just as one would prepare for pregnancy, another time of life with major hormonal shifts. Find time to sit quietly or meditate each day for 30 minutes or so to let the stresses of your everyday life flow out of your body. It is also a good time to tackle unresolved health issues and imbalances.

If you have been taking HRT for years, your body has become dependent on these outside hormones, and it may be counterproductive to abruptly discontinue them. Instead, gradually decrease the amount, in consultation with your physician.

In cases where a woman's underlying health is poor

when she enters menopause, it is sometimes necessary for her to take hormones for a brief period to jump start the body's recovery, along with TCM treatments.

The end of the menstrual cycle does not have to be uncomfortable and difficult — on the contrary, it can signal the beginning of a fulfilling new phase of your life as you re-think your priorities, find balance and reach for your dreams anew.

If you, or someone you care about, face this life transition, consider scheduling time with an experienced acupuncturist to learn how TCM can help to avoid the side effects and risks of HRT. ❀

For information about acupuncture, herbs, and referral lists to acupuncturists in your area, visit the websites of the American Assoc. of Oriental Medicine (www.aaom.org) and the Calif. State Oriental Medical Assoc. (www.csomaonline.org).

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RESOURCES

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