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## Alternative Approaches to Supporting Women during Menopause

It happens to all women at some time or another. Our ovaries finally give up the struggle and stop producing estrogen and progesterone. At the onset of menopause, estrogen production drops by 50% and progesterone by 99%. Unfortunately, many women experience a barrage of unpleasant symptoms such as hot flashes, sweats, insomnia and palpitations at this time, and this decline in sex hormones is often followed by an increased risk of heart attacks, stroke and osteoporosis.

Once a woman reaches menopause, the fat cells and adrenal glands are the primary source of estrogen. The adrenal glands are not only involved in sex hormone production, they are also the prime movers and shakers of the body's "adaptogenic" response; the ability of the body to cope with, or adapt to stress, so it is obviously very important to maintain the health of these powerful little glands. Needless to say, many women feel that they need some form of help and support at this time in their lives. This article briefly describes some of the alternative approaches to supporting women during menopause. Please call me if you require more details or suggestions of useful reading material.

It would, of course, be perfect if we could get all the vitamins and minerals that we need from our diets. Unfortunately, our busy schedules, poor eating habits and the way our food is grown all work against this happening. For this reason I usually recommend some form of supplementation. Here are a few of the main ones:

- 1 Vitamin B complex helps to ease stress-related fatigue (Vitamin B5, B6 and PABA are especially important).
- 2 Vitamin C supports adrenals, liver and immune function.
- 3 Bioflavonoids (usually available with vitamin C) support capillary integrity and act as antioxidants.
- 4 Vitamin E reduces hot flashes and supports the cardiovascular system.
- 5 Calcium, Magnesium and Boron help to maintain and build bone.
- 6 Vitamin D (made in our skin, so get out in the sun for 20 minutes per

day) also for bone health.

A good quality, high B, multi-vitamin will provide most of the important vitamins and minerals. This should be taken along with a diet high in calcium, and calcium and magnesium supplementation as needed (menopausal women should be taking around 1200-1500mg calcium per day). Extra vitamin C and E are also recommended.

Additional natural support comes in the form of:

- 1 Soy-based foods that are rich in phytoestrogens and help lessen menopausal symptoms in many women, and may also protect against cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, and osteoporosis.
- 2 Flax seeds contain high levels of lignan phytoestrogens, soluble fiber and an essential fatty acid alpha linolenic acid. These are used to make omega-3, and omega-6 fatty acids that promote good cardiovascular health and decrease inflammation.

Other dietary and lifestyle changes include reducing stress, and/or managing it with yoga or meditation; regular weight-bearing exercise; eliminating the use of stimulants such as coffee and nicotine which are known to decrease bone density; reducing or eliminating alcohol; reducing animal fat and protein, substituting soy-based foods; and increasing intake of fiber. Regular annual physical examinations are also highly recommended including PAP tests and measurements of blood lipids and glucose. A bone density scan at the onset of menopause is a useful baseline for any changes that may occur.

In addition to these diet and lifestyle changes there are many different herbal remedies that have been used to relieve menopausal symptoms for centuries. The phytoestrogen and hormone precursor activities of soy and flax seeds are represented throughout the plant kingdom. Specific herbs such as black cohosh root (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), chaste tree berry (*Vitex agnus castus*), wild yam (*Discorea vilosa*), red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and licorice root (*Glycerrhiza uralensis* or *glabra*) are rich sources of hormone-like substances. There are also many traditional Chinese herbs that restore energy balance even in the face of biological aging.

Some women opt for hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Estrogen increases the breakdown of LDL (bad cholesterol) and increases production of HDL (good cholesterol), therefore decreasing incidence of heart disease.

It also decreases the breakdown of bone, thereby decreasing osteoporosis. The estrogen used in HRT is extracted from **pregnant mare's** urine (Premarin®), and, while this may sound natural, many MDs and NDs are now questioning the wisdom of using high doses of very active estrogens. As an alternative to horse-derived hormones, estrogens derived from plants have been formulated so that they are bio-identical to the three principle estrogens that occur naturally in the human body. This means that women needing additional hormones can use combinations of estrogens (such as Tri-est) that more closely mimic human hormones, and as such are safer with fewer side effects. In addition, plant-derived progesterone is often added to this alternative estrogen combination because it is widely believed that estrogen replacement alone leads to "estrogen dominance" and a variety of different symptoms from depression, irritability and exhaustion to increased blood pressure, weight gain and lowered libido. Please call me at The Guelph Naturopathic Healthcare Clinic, 827-9605 if you have any questions about this or other health related topics.