

The Office of Women's Health will be featuring a special health note for the next three months on issues of aging as a prelude to an upcoming Community Dialogue on WOMEN AND AGING on **October 5<sup>th</sup>**. PLEASE SAVE THE DATE!

## **MENOPAUSE**

Menopause is a normal and natural event which occurs on average at age 51 and is confirmed when a woman has missed her periods for 12 consecutive months.

The condition leading up to menopause is called perimenopause and can occur from the time a woman is in her late thirties up to her early fifties. Perimenopause can last from 2 to 8 years. During this transition period in a woman's life when her ovaries stop producing eggs, her body produces less estrogen and progesterone and menstruation becomes less frequent, eventually stopping altogether. Once a woman has stopped menstruating for one year, she is officially in menopause. (1)

### **Symptoms**

As menopause approaches, a woman may experience symptoms such as irregular periods, hot flashes, night sweats, trouble sleeping, vaginal dryness, low sex drive, mood swings, trouble focusing, hair loss on the head or elsewhere, and more hair on the face. The most common of these symptoms are hot flashes and night sweats. (1)

Hot flashes cause sudden intense heat. Heavy sweating and cold shivering can follow. Most hot flashes last between 30 seconds and 10 minutes and can occur at any time of day or night (night sweats). (2)

Although the exact cause of hot flashes isn't known, science points to factors affecting the function of the body's hypothalamus. This area at the base of the brain regulates body temperature and other basic processes. The estrogen reduction women experience during menopause may disrupt hypothalamic function, leading to hot flashes. Low estrogen alone doesn't often seem to induce hot flashes, as children and women with low levels of estrogen due to medical conditions usually don't experience this symptom. Instead, the withdrawal of estrogen, as happens during menopause, appears to be the trigger. (3)

### **Treatments for Menopausal Symptoms**

- Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is the most effective therapy currently available. The risks and benefits of HRT should be weighed by each woman and her health care provider before she decides to use it. It is currently recommended that the lowest effective dose be given for the shortest amount of time. (2)

- Bioidentical hormones are estrogen and progesterone made from plants such as soy or yams. They are supposed to be chemically the same as the hormones naturally made by a woman's body. These so-called 'natural hormones' are put together (compounded) by a compounding pharmacist. This pharmacist follows a formula decided on by a doctor or practitioner of alternative medicine familiar with this approach. Because compounded hormones are not regulated or approved by the FDA, not much is known about how safe or effective they are or how the quality varies from batch to batch. (4)
- Botanicals: A botanical, such as black cohosh, is a plant or plant part valued for its medicinal or therapeutic properties, flavor, and/or scent. Herbs are a subset of botanicals. A particular group of chemicals or a single chemical may be isolated from a botanical and sold as a dietary supplement, usually in tablet or capsule form. An example is phytoestrogens from soy products. Studies on alternative treatments such as black cohosh and phytoestrogens have not yet proven them to be effective or have been inconclusive. (5)

With a healthy lifestyle (especially routine physical activity) and the social support of friends and family, symptoms are often manageable and intervention may not be necessary. Research findings indicate that the majority of women pass through the menopausal transition with relatively little or no discomfort. (6) Many women report that menopause is a new beginning for them – a period of personal growth and freedom.

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#### References:

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3. Hot Flashes (2009) The Mayo Clinic.com. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/hot-flashes/DS01143/METHOD=print>
4. <http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/hormones.htm> (September 2009)
5. <http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/botanicalbackground.asp>
6. Study of Women's Health Across the Nation. <http://www.edc.gsph.pitt.edu/swan/>