

# Best Menopausal Herbs and Whole Foods

By Dr. Zoltan P. Rona, M.D., M.Sc. • [www.mydoctor.ca/drzoltanrona](http://www.mydoctor.ca/drzoltanrona)

## What is Menopause?

Menopause or “the change of life” is the time in a woman’s life when menstruation stops permanently. The ovaries reduce their production of female sex hormones - a gradual process, which begins about 3 to 5 years before the final menstrual period. Some refer to this transitional phase of as the climacteric or “perimenopause”.

Menopause is considered complete or finished (post-menopause) when a woman has been without periods for 1 year. The average age at which this occurs is 50 but this number is variable from woman to woman. Menopause starts around the late forties when periods start to get more irregular and finally stop altogether at an average age of 50 (earlier in black and non-European women). Cigarette smokers tend to have an earlier onset of menopause compared to non-smokers.

Surgical menopause is that which is brought about by the excision of a woman’s ovaries due to diseases such as cancer, infection or abnormal pregnancies. Women who have undergone the surgical removal of their ovaries usually experience a more uncomfortable form of menopause with very severe hot flashes that last much longer and are considerably more uncomfortable, a greater risk of heart disease as well as osteoporosis and depression.

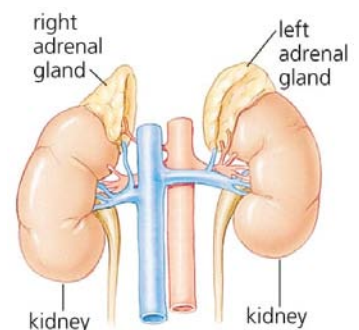
Menopause, if not precipitated by such surgery, is a natural event in every woman’s life. It is not a “deficiency disease”, “deterioration”, an “estrogen starvation” or a long list of other archaic, patriarchal medical labels. It is a process of change and transition as a woman’s body sheds its childbearing potential and adjusts to lower levels of hormones.


In the healthy female, once the ovaries stop producing the female hormones, the adrenal glands eventually produce enough hormones to maintain balance. During this transition period, women experience a host of symptoms that prompt them to visit their doctors. Unfortunately, such doctor visits in North America all too often end with a prescription for hormones derived from the urine of pregnant horses and synthetic progesterone, both of which have a long list of hazardous side effects.

Menopause is an individualized experience with nothing about it cast in stone. Some women welcome the prospect of having no more menstrual periods, notice little to no difference in their bodies or moods and cannot understand what all the fuss is about. Others find the change of life so extremely bothersome and disruptive that they feel their life will suddenly come to an abrupt end. The effects of a lower level of estrogen and progesterone, while not identical from woman to woman, can produce a list of discomforts. Since menopause is a normal part of life and not a disease, it is inappropriate to refer to the discomforts of the change as “signs and symptoms”.

## The Adrenal Gland Connection

Menopause is one major life event strongly connected to adrenal glandular function. In the healthy female, once the ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone, the adrenal glands take over production to maintain a comfortable balance. If this transition period does not occur smoothly, women entering menopause will experience severe and often debilitating hot flashes, vaginal dryness, depression, loss of libido, accelerating osteoporosis, memory disturbances and blood sugar control problems (hypoglycemia). Adrenal insufficiency can cause exaggerated or early menopausal discomforts that create the illusion that prescription hormone replacement therapy is needed.





The ability to deal effectively with physical, chemical, emotional and other environmental stressors such as viruses, ionizing radiation and prolonged physical exertion depends largely on the health of your adrenal response.

The adrenals are a pair of glands shaped like Napoleon's hat that lie just above the kidneys. They secrete more than three dozen hormones derived from cholesterol directly into the bloodstream. Each gland, about one to two inches in length and weighing only a fraction of an ounce each, is composed of two distinct parts, the inner adrenal medulla and the outer adrenal cortex. The outer region secretes hormones known as corticosteroids of which there are three types: mineral corticoids, glucocorticoids and the 17-ketosteroids (sex hormones). ACTH, a pituitary hormone, controls adrenal cortical hormones. The inner adrenal medulla secretes epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine (noradrenaline), the hormones that mediate the "flight-or-flight" alarm response to stress. Adrenal medullary hormones are controlled by the sympathetic nervous system.

The glucocorticoids (cortisol, corticosterone, and cortisone) cause blood sugar levels to go higher, reduce inflammation and dampen the allergic response. Abnormal levels of glucocorticoids could be partially responsible for hypoglycemia or diabetes, an exaggerated pain response and poorly controlled allergies. The mineral corticoids, the most important of which is aldosterone, cause the body to retain sodium while increasing potassium excretion. Abnormal aldosterone levels can therefore create imbalances between sodium and potassium and, consequently, fluid levels in the body. The major sex hormone produced by the adrenal cortex is the androgen, DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) which is then converted into other sex hormones (testosterone, estrogens, and progesterone).

### Common physical discomforts of menopause

- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Thinning skin
- Vaginal dryness and atrophy (shrinkage)
- Painful intercourse
- Slow healing
- Joint pains

### Common mental discomforts of menopause


- Mood swings and depression
- Poor concentration
- Memory lapses
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Nervousness
- Insomnia and sleep disturbances
- Reduced or loss of libido (interest in sex)


### Menopause increases the risks for:

- Unnecessary surgery (hysterectomies)
- Osteoporosis
- Heart Disease/Atherosclerosis
- Cancer
- Iatrogenic (doctor-caused) diseases

A hot flash (flush) can be defined as a sudden sensation of intense heat in the upper part or all of the body. Red blotches can suddenly appear on the face and neck, chest, back, and arms, often followed by profuse sweating and then cold shivering as body temperature readjusts. Hot flashes can last a few moments or 30 minutes or longer, depending on the individual. Caffeine, alcohol, hot drinks, spicy foods, and stressful or frightening events can sometimes trigger a hot flash but often there is no obvious cause with occurrences happening seemingly at random.

Continued on inside pages...





Doctors disagree about whether all menopausal women should be on hormones or whether hormones should be reserved for women with severe hot flashes, vaginal dryness or those at high risk for bone loss and heart attacks. Some prescribe synthetic estrogen with or without progesterone to all their menopausal patients. Others, however, maintain that only rare women should be prescribed synthetic hormones and that symptoms can be controlled entirely by natural means. I fall into this latter category. Doctors also disagree about the length of time hormones should be taken. The extremist pharmaceutical view holds that menopausal women should be on hormones until death.


Conventional doctors rarely question the wisdom of multinational drug company marketing. Conventional HRT is mainly supported by studies sponsored by the manufacturers of synthetic hormones. Despite the grandiose claims of this drug lobby, there is little scientific evidence to support the use of estrogen for the prevention of heart disease, osteoporosis or any other disease. Long-term studies on the effects of estrogen and progesterone on healthy postmenopausal women have never been done. A recent editorial in the New England Journal of Medicine puts it this way: “Since the long term safety of hormone replacement therapy has not yet been fully elucidated, there is need for other effective therapies for the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis.”

Low estrogen is but one of 40 factors involved in the development of osteoporosis. Exercise and vegetarian (low protein) diets have been shown to be far more important for osteoporosis prevention. Other major risk factors for osteoporosis development are cigarette smoking, excessive alcohol and caffeine intake, having a fair complexion, having had the ovaries removed or other causes of early menopause, a positive family history of osteoporosis, never having been pregnant, drugs such as cortisone, diuretics (water pills), anti-seizure medications and anticoagulants (“blood thinners”), digestive disorders and overactive endocrine glands (especially hyperthyroidism).

### **Conventional hormonal replacement therapy during menopause can cause:**

- An increased risk of breast cancer and uterine cancer
- Abnormal Pap tests
- Abnormal bleeding with resulting iron deficiency
- Candida (yeast) infections
- Circulation problems
- Eye changes, pain and visual disturbances
- High blood pressure
- Abnormal blood clotting (thrombosis)
- Migraines
- Strokes
- Increased coronary artery disease risk
- Weight gain
- Fluid retention
- Acne
- Skin color changes
- Bloating
- Loss of libido
- Depression
- Increased sensitivity to light
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Loss of coordination
- Increasing breast lumps (fibrocystic breast disease)
- Painful urination
- Endometriosis
- Liver and gall bladder disease
- Pancreatitis
- Epilepsy

The use of estrogen hormone by itself is associated with a three to four times increased incidence of uterine cancer. To lower the potential cancer risk, doctors usually add a progesterone prescription for 10 days out of every cycle.



Unfortunately, this causes menopausal women to continue bleeding monthly after menopause, which continues as long as she is on hormone replacement therapy.

Hormone replacement therapy is linked to an increased risk of breast cancer. According to Dr. Sidney Wolfe and a 1991 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, "If a woman used estrogen pills for 15 years, she had a 30% excess rate of breast cancer. If used for 25 years, a 'goal' toward which many doctors are pushing their patients, there would be a 50% increased risk of breast cancer..." Women have now been exposed to both long-term hormone treatment in the form of the birth control pill and long-term hormone treatment in the form of estrogen replacement. No one really knows what the combined effect might be on the intricate workings of the female reproductive system.



There are several ongoing studies to evaluate the specific interaction but the results won't be available for ten to twenty years. Many doctors feel that medicating a natural life process with potentially toxic drugs cannot be justified on the basis of some very questionable research. Certainly, there are no safety and efficacy studies which are conclusive enough to warrant the wide scale drugging of a normal, healthy female population.

## Herbal and Whole Food Relief for Menopause

There is now a growing body of medical evidence to add to the folklore supporting the use of certain popular herbs to help women through menopause. The following is a list of the best documented of these remedies:

- 1) **Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*)** The standardized 27-deoxyacteine herbal extract exerts its benefits in menopause due to its estrogenic effects. It should be noted that estrogen is really 3 different hormones (estradiol, estriol and estrone). While estradiol is the estrogen thought to increase the risk of breast and uterine cancer, estriol is the estrogen thought to be the one preventing these cancers. Black cohosh extract is estriol-like in its behavior, making it a safe supplement for women with a high risk for breast and uterine cancers. No studies have ever reported side effects with black cohosh extract. Both human and animal studies have shown that black cohosh, unlike synthetic estrogens (mainly variations of estradiol), does not produce endometrial thickening or tumors.

This estrogenic stimulating effect of black cohosh has been an issue with many mainstream doctors who have erroneously warned women with breast cancer and other hormone dependent cancers to avoid black cohosh. This is nothing more than unsubstantiated superstition. No study supports this view and women fighting breast, ovarian and uterine cancer should have no fears in using this herb to control unwanted symptoms during menopause.

Black cohosh extract is the most widely used herbal approach to menopause. In Germany (since 1956), Scandinavia and Austria, it is, in fact, the number one remedy for menopausal discomforts. The current Kommission E, the world standard for regulating herbs, recommends using black cohosh extract for 6 months, although most women

have used it safely for years on end. What I usually recommend for women is to try going off the herb from time to time to see what happens. While some women will experience no adverse effects after stopping black cohosh extract after 6 months, this response is not universal.

- 2) **Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)** Aptly named because of its traditional ability to improve brain function and memory. Its use in menopause, however, is for its benefits in relieving hot flashes and excessive sweating, especially at night. Its mechanism of action in this area is as an estrogen booster.

Sage, however, has many other important benefits. While not a panacea, sage has been used to help reduce excessive perspiration by as much as 50%. In fact, there are many sage-based deodorants sold in health food stores. Sage also soothes digestive problems and sore throats, premenstrual cramps and high blood sugar.

Sage has anti-microbial activity and is added to some natural mouthwashes for its ability to prevent gingivitis. Other sage applications include canker sores, bleeding gums, tonsillitis and laryngitis.

Any of you folks out there remember the 60s Simon and Garfunkel song, “Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme”? I think they were singing about sage as a culinary herb but if you can’t remember that song, at least you should know that sage protects the nervous system from being depleted of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter crucial for good memory. This is something that can get impaired during menopause and sage is the ideal herb for this menopausal discomfort.

Sage relaxes muscle spasms and cramps in the gastrointestinal tract and helps reduce excessively high blood sugar levels in diabetics when taken on an empty stomach. Side effects of sage use are extremely rare. Extremely concentrated forms of the herb in tea extracts can cause inflammation of the lips and lining of the mouth. Sage has also been traditionally used to promote menstruation and may stimulate uterine contractions. As a precaution, pregnant women should not use concentrated forms of sage despite the fact that the culinary use of the herb has no effect on pregnancy.


- 3) **Gamma-Oryzanol** Which has antioxidant actions and is commonly used in cosmetics and sunscreens. Studies indicate that gamma-oryzanol can boost testosterone levels and stimulate lean muscle production and release pain relieving and mood-enhancing substances called endorphins. Body builders are familiar with its steroid like benefits without the steroid side effects.

Gamma-oryzanol been reported to relieve all menopausal discomforts in up to 85% of all women who use the supplement for 2 months or longer without side effects. It also has benefits in controlling high blood cholesterol levels, healing gastrointestinal problems such as the leaky gut syndrome and has been reported to be 10 times stronger than vitamin E as an antioxidant.

Gamma-oryzanol has very rarely been reported to cause side effects but massive dosages (600 mg daily taken for months) can cause dry mouth, drowsiness, hot flashes, irritability and dizziness. Pregnant women should avoid it as a precaution.

- 4) **Chaste Berry (*Vitex agnus*)** This herb appears to work by stimulating the pituitary gland to manufacture more progesterone and less estrogen. Chaste berry is a very effective remedy for problems women encounter in PMS, heavy menstrual periods as well as most of the usual discomforts of menopause.





Chaste berry is also used to enhance fertility, relieve breast area tenderness just before and during periods, relieve period related headaches, depression, irritability and fluid retention. Endometriosis pain as well as acne can be helped by chaste berry mainly because of its ability to normalize hormone levels. Of interest is also the fact that chaste berry has been documented to lower cholesterol levels.

Women who have been using natural progesterone cream for hormonal imbalance symptoms related to periods or menopause may find similar relief from chaste berry that comes without a doctor's prescription. Not only is this a safer way to deal with menopausal discomforts but also it is also considerably less expensive than filling hormone prescriptions month after month.

5) **Maca (*Lepidium meyenii*)** is a unique cruciferous vegetable of the mustard family, related to radishes and turnips, that grow at altitudes of 14,500 feet in the Andean mountains of Peru. It grows where no other plant can survive. Maca is rich in numerous medicinal compounds including alkaloids, amino acids, glucosinolates and sterols. Maca is an energy booster but also relieves menopausal hot flashes, insomnia, stress and depression while increasing libido. It is regarded as an adaptogen. It elevates pituitary and adrenal hormones when they are too low and reduces them when they are too high. The benefits of maca in both men and women are:

- Aphrodisiac effects
- Enhanced libido, improved potency and erectile dysfunction
- Increased energy and well-being
- Increased stamina and endurance
- Improved depression
- Reduced stress
- Relieved hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms
- Balanced adrenal and gonadal hormones
- Relieved PMS
- Increased DHEA levels (if they are too low)
- Increased seminal volume, sperm count and motility
- Better athletic performance
- Increased testosterone levels
- Fertility enhancement

6) **Dong Quai (*Angelica sinensis*)** Like black cohosh extract, dong quai has mild estrogenic (estriol-like) effects as well as the ability to stabilize blood vessels. Dong quai has a very good reputation amongst herbally knowledgeable women as a very effective premenstrual syndrome treatment as well as painful menses (dysmenorrhea) remedy.

Dong Quai has also been referred to as “female ginseng” but it has benefits in both men and women as a fertility enhancer. It contains ferulic acid, an antioxidant shown to improve sperm quality. It basically works as a hormone balancer, reducing estrogen levels when they are too high and boosting estrogen levels when they are too low. Consequently, it is effective for treating virtually any gynecological problem including PMS and menopausal hot flashes.

Dong quai is often used as a tonic because of its vitamin and mineral content. It is a source of vitamin B12, folic acid, biotin and other B complex vitamins. Dong Quai is also well known as an anti-stress and anti-anxiety agent. It reduces the severity of mood swings and generally has a calming effect on the nervous system. It is used worldwide as an anti-aging herb because of its ability to improve circulation and detoxification. It can improve or eliminate skin conditions such as eczema, hives, vitiligo and rosacea and reverse some cases of hair loss.

There are warnings about using Dong Quai during pregnancy, breast cancer, other female cancers, endometriosis and in men with prostate cancer. These are all theoretical concerns and have yet to be proven.



7) **Schisandra Berry Extract (Schisandra chinensis)** Menopause threatens a woman's beauty, sexuality and youthfulness. Schisandra is what can help women in these areas mainly because it is primarily an adaptogenic, anti-ageing tonic. Rather than some cosmetic that is slathered on the skin, schisandra works to enhance beauty from the inside out. It increases stamina and mental clarity while fighting stress and fatigue. It also works as an anti-depressant and sexual enhancer. Schisandra also has applications in reversing many liver disorders including hepatitis and can be found in most formulas touted as liver cleansers or detoxifiers.

Schisandra can act as a uterine stimulant and should be avoided during pregnancy for that reason. People who have high blood pressure should also be cautious in using schisandra.

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