# Menopause and Herbal Products

Menopause is the normal time of life when menstrual periods stop completely. Menopause is complete when you have missed 12 consecutive menstrual periods. It usually occurs between the ages of 48-55, with an average age of 51. Very rarely does a woman develop menopause before 40 years old. At menopause, your ovaries stop producing the female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. This can cause undesirable symptoms and also affect your health. Sometimes the symptoms may occur 4-5 years before the menopause begins. There is no relationship between oral contraceptives, number of children you had, race or the age your menstrual periods started (*menarche*). Heavy smokers and very thin women may develop menopause earlier in life.

Estrogen and progesterone hormone treatment is the usual method of treating menopausal symptoms. However, there are women who should not take hormone treatment. This is true of:

- Women that have breast or uterine cancer.
- Women who prefer not to take hormones because of certain side effects (abnormal uterine bleeding).
- Women who are afraid that hormones may cause breast cancer.

For these women, there are other medications that may help treat their menopausal symptoms. These medications are found in plants and botanical products. They can be found in the form of herbs, teas, oils, tinctures and pills.

## CAUSES OF MENOPAUSE:

- The ovaries stop producing the female hormones estrogen and progesterone.
- Other causes include:
  - Surgery to remove both ovaries.
  - The ovaries stop functioning for no known reason.
  - Tumors of the pituitary gland in the brain.
  - Medical disease that affects the ovaries and hormone production.
  - Radiation treatment to the abdomen or pelvis
  - Chemotherapy that affects the ovaries.

## PHYTOESTROGENS:

Phytoestrogen's occur naturally in plants and plant products. They act like estrogen in the body. Herbal medications are made from these plants and botanical steroids. There are three types of phytoestrogens:

- *Isoflavones* (genistein and daidzein) are found in soy, garbanzo beans, miso and tofu foods.
- *Ligins* are found in the shell of seeds. They are used to make oils like flaxseed oil. The bacteria in your intestine act on these foods to produce the estrogen-like hormones.
- *Coumestans* are more estrogen-like for animals than humans. They are found in sunflower seeds and bean sprouts.

## TREATMENT WITH HERBAL MEDICATIONS FOR:

- Hot flashes and night sweats.
  - Soy, black cohosh and evening primrose.
- Irritability, insomnia, depression and memory problems.
  - Casteberry, ginseng, and soy.
  - St. John’s Wort may be helpful for depression. However, there is a concern of it causing cataracts of the eye and may have bad effects on other medications. St. John's Wort should not be taken for long time and without your caregiver's advice.
- Loss of libido and vaginal and skin dryness.
  - Wild yam and soy.
- Prevention of coronary heart disease and osteoporosis.
  - Soy and Isoflavones.

Other forms of treatment to help women with menopausal symptoms include a balanced diet, rest, exercise, vitamin and calcium (with vitamin D) supplements, acupuncture and group therapy when necessary.

## WOMEN WHO **SHOULD NOT** TAKE HERBAL MEDICATIONS:

- Infants, children and elderly women unless told by your caregiver.
- Women who are planning on getting pregnant unless told by your caregiver.
- Women who are breastfeeding unless told by your caregiver.
- Women who are taking other prescription medications unless told by your caregiver.

Different herbal medications have different and unmeasured amounts of the herbal ingredients. There are no regulations, quality control and standardization of the ingredients in herbal medications. Therefore, the amount of the ingredient in the medication may vary from one herb, pill, tea, oil or tincture to another. Many herbal medications can cause serious problems and can even have poisonous effects if taken too much or too long. If problems develop, the medication should be stopped and recorded by your caregiver.

## HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Do not** take or give children herbal medications without your caregiver's advice.
- Let your caregiver know all the medications you are taking. This includes prescription, over-the-counter, eye drops and creams.
- **Do not** take herbal medications longer or more than recommended.
- Tell your caregiver about any side effects from the medication.

## SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop a fever of 100º F (37.8º C), or as directed by your caregiver.
- You feel sick to your stomach (*nauseous*), vomit or have diarrhea.
- You develop a rash.
- You develop abdominal pain.
- You develop severe headaches.
- You start to have vision problems.
- You feel dizzy or faint.
- You start to feel numbness in any part of your body.
- You start shaking (*convulsions*).

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