



by Lori Ann Gormley, R.Ph, CME

**F**or women, menopause is inevitable. Suffering with its symptoms is not. Defined as the absence of menses for one year, it is most common for women to begin natural menopause at age 51. However, a hysterectomy can force a woman directly into "surgical menopause," which skips the natural transition of a woman's body and is often difficult to manage.

## Perimenopause

The phase of a woman's life referred to as perimenopause, can be the most challenging. Perimenopause, which can begin between age 35 and 50, may bring with it more symptoms than menopause. A stage directly prior to a woman's period stopping at menopause, disruptive perimenopausal symptoms can last for 5 to 15 years.

Women need to understand their body's changes and be knowledgeable of the options available for treatment. Individualized "symptomatic treatments" for unique needs as well as supportive measures are instrumental in a therapy plan.

## Symptoms

Symptoms brought about by fluctuating and declining hormone levels can occur at any time, either slowly or suddenly. The body's response to varying hormone levels may be simple for one woman but complex for another. Initially, irregular cycles, mood swings, insomnia, and fatigue are mild at first and sometimes go unnoticed. While hot flashes and night sweats are most prevalent, affecting approximately 50% of women, additional symptoms of hormone deficiencies/imbalance can include headaches, achy joints, depression, anxiety, mood swings, foggy thinking, memory loss, weight gain, vaginal dryness, and loss of sexual desire. While these symptoms are a result of inconsistent levels of estrogen and progesterone, as well as testosterone, hormones such as DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) and cortisol can help, as well as vitamins and nutritional supplements.

## Hormone Evaluation

A hormone evaluation using a complete medical history, hormone test levels, and a detailed symptom checklist, is an essential tool to determine the hormonal status. Blood testing for FSH and LH is recognized as well as saliva testing, which may provide a more conclusive picture of hormone imbalances.

## Saliva Testing

Women can obtain a saliva kit with a step-by-step testing guide to complete an at-home test. Sent to a laboratory for evaluation, results are mailed to the consulting pharmacist. A confidential hormone consultation to correct low hormone levels and to maintain the correct balance of estrogen and progesterone is scheduled to determine the correct starting dose of the bio-identical hormone replacement prescription. Follow up is essential as a woman's needs continually change with age.

## Bio-Identical Hormone Replacement Therapy

Bio-identical hormone replacement therapy, a natural and direct way to treat deficiencies, mimics a woman's natural hormones. These hormones are plant derived, with the exact chemical structure as hormones naturally produced in a woman's body. Compounding pharmacies have the advantage of being able to custom tailor the hormone dosage to the individual patient's needs, enabling a woman to take the lowest possible dose to relieve her symptoms and maintain her quality of life. Options include a daily oral capsule using one or multiple ingredients, topical gels and creams, or flavored troches that dissolve in the mouth.

## Synthetic Hormones

Synthetic hormones do not match a woman's natural chemistry. Generally not "user friendly," a Women's Health Initiative study examined their effects and impact on women. Data obtained regarding synthetic estrogens and progestins confirmed suspected risks. The study was terminated before completion to protect the woman participating in the study from unwanted side effects and irreversible medical conditions.

Perimenopause, menopause, and post menopause are natural stages that represent the crossroads of a woman's life. Women can adapt well to each when they become attuned to their bodies and take charge of their health. Exercise routines, healthier eating habits, supplements, and bio-identical hormone replacement therapy can make the road of life a little less bumpy.

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