

The women's epidemic few people discuss

Unlike hot flashes and other temporary symptoms of the menopause transition, the symptoms won't go away on their own and cry for medical intervention. Many doctors are too embarrassed to raise the subject. It's up to women to take the initiative.

Lois Glover

A healthy vagina is full of wrinkles. Women should want to keep these wrinkles – unfortunately though, we will lose them with age, as a woman's vagina becomes shorter, dryer, and less stretchy. A loss of estrogen that begins as we approach menopause or in subsequent years causes these changes in the vaginal tissues. This shrinking of the vagina or genitals is known as "vaginal atrophy" or "urogenital aging" and may affect as many as two million Canadian women in the next decade.

Many treatments available

Symptoms of urogenital aging can include vaginal dryness and itchiness, difficulty with or inability to have intercourse, as well as painful or frequent urination. Some women may only experience urinary symptoms or may notice an increased genital discomfort with certain activities such as swimming or bike riding. Unlike hot flashes and other temporary symptoms of the menopause transition, the symptoms of urogenital aging will not go away on their own. The good news is there are a lot of treatment options available.

The bad news is many women are embarrassed or afraid to talk to their family doctor about the symptoms they are experiencing. Many women pretend that intercourse is not painful for them. Some women go for years without having intercourse, or have intercourse infrequently due to pain. Many physicians are also embarrassed to begin this conversation. But at what age do we begin telling women their genitalia will start shrinking? If it were men whose genitalia were shrinking, you can bet they would be demanding the healthcare system be proactive in its treatment. It is time for women to stop suffering in silence.

Life is about the journey. If a woman wants to remain sexually active, there comes a point where she may want to consider use of estrogen. The outer third of the vagina is where most estrogen receptors and nerve fibres are. In the absence of estrogen, the vagina will narrow and become dry. This narrowing contributes to discomfort during intimate touching.

Treatment required

Whether a woman is heterosexual or lesbian, she needs treatment in the post-menopausal years to continue to use her vagina. Treatment will also maintain the lower urinary tract and help women avoid urinary frequency and urgency, and those endless trips to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Local estrogen therapy is maintenance therapy for vaginal and lower urinary tract aging. There are many different options available such as cream, rings and



It's time to start talking about the symptoms of menopause.

tablets that can be easily placed in the vagina. Unfortunately, many women fear local estrogen therapy is linked to the findings of the massive Women's Health Initiative in the United States that are suggestive of increased breast cancer, heart attacks, and strokes when using hormone therapy. This is absolutely untrue.

Women must raise issue

The WHI was never meant to be interpreted for use in the maintenance and prevention of vaginal atrophy. The doses used today for vaginal atrophy are much smaller, localized and taken far less frequently. It is only when a woman is ready to give up use of her vagina or urethra that she should end treatment.

While there are lubricants, vaginal moisturizers, and intimacy enhancers on the market, it's important to

start by obtaining a clear diagnosis. Valentine's Day is just around the corner, a fitting time for a woman to take this important step and begin talking about it with her partner and physician. Until women and healthcare providers get more comfortable talking about these subjects, the woman may have to bring up the topic of vaginal or lower urinary tract symptoms with her doctor. And until we women start talking about it, vaginal and lower urinary tract aging will continue to be a silent epidemic and put a damper on Valentine's Day activities for maturing women.

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