

Menopause

Great changes ahead

By Christina McVety

Regardless of women's social and cultural differences, menopause affects all women. The majority of opinion puts menopause in a negative light, treating it as a sickness or affliction. But menopause is a life change, not an illness. Women can take charge of their menopause experience by combining a healthy lifestyle with positive thinking and education.

Menopause occurs when women reach their final menstrual cycle. The average age for natural menopause is 51. Treatment-induced menopause occurs in women if they've had chemotherapy, radiation or a hysterectomy. Natural menopause is gradual, whereas treatment-induced menopause is sudden and can produce stronger symptoms.

The most common menopausal symptom is the hot flash, an intense sudden wave of heat that produces sweating. Other symptoms include night sweats, fatigue, mood changes and migraines. These symptoms, in turn, can cause sleep problems.

"A lot of women are so busy juggling other things in their life that they haven't taken the time for self-care," says Lois Glover, a nurse clinician at the Victoria Hospital Mature Women's Centre. "They need to know that there are things they can do so they don't feel so out of control; women need to move into a positive frame of mind, and that's hard when you haven't slept and you don't feel good."

Women who visit the centre's menopause clinic come on referral from physicians, and meet with nurses to assess individual needs. Together they develop a personal plan to deal with a woman's unique challenges, which sometimes includes pharmaceutical treatment or hormone therapy.

But most women don't require measures such as hormone therapy, and rely instead on lifestyle changes to ease symptoms. One of the first things women can do to take control of their menopause is to look at their diet. Eating healthy food and maintaining proper

vitamin D intake helps with fatigue.

Awareness of factors that can trigger sweats – smoking, caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods – can reduce symptoms. Simple things such as maintaining a cooler room temperature and wearing lighter fabrics also provide relief.

Glover says one of the challenges women face is the amount of unreliable and misleading information available, and she encourages women to approach information from books and the Internet with a critical mind.

"The media may portray certain research findings as if they apply to all women when really they don't," says Glover, who helps women filter information and understand how it relates to them. "You can't paint women with one brush – what works for one woman doesn't necessarily work for another."

Glover recommends visiting the North American Menopause Society (NAMS) website at www.menopause.org to access accurate scientific research. NAMS is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing women with qualified, accurate and unbiased information while promoting health and quality of life for women with menopause.



Glover makes the observation that menopausal women have confidence and experience on their side while embarking on this life change, something they didn't have during adolescence. "I see women taking on new adventures and challenges during menopause," she says. "Women who see it as a time of rich personal growth."



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