

## The Nasty “M” Word

Many of my clients are approaching an age when the horrors of menopause become a concern. I say the ‘horrors’ because the word, *menopause*, connotes negativity and not many ladies have happy stories to report, other than, ‘thank goodness that has passed!’ However, lifestyle modifications can help the symptoms of what can be a trying time for some.

If there is anything predictable about menopause, it’s that its symptoms are unpredictable. Symptoms that bother some women aren’t even on the radar for others. It’s important to note that menopause is a *natural* event and that it’s presence is evidenced by ‘symptoms’ that need to be managed, not ‘cured’. There are some pharmaceutical options that can be considered, but there are risks and the benefits must outweigh any risks. Drug options and even herbal remedies should be discussed with your family physician. Many things can be done on the ‘lifestyle’ front before that conversation with your doctor takes place.

In some regards, menopause gets a bum wrap in that a myriad of problems are seemingly related to this event. The average age of ‘onset’ of menopause is 51 and lasts four years. It can start as soon as the early forties or be delayed to the late fifties. As it turns out, this is also a time in a woman’s life when sedentary living sets in. Depression, weight gain, mental slowing, sleep troubles, joint problems, fatigue and anxiety affect women and men in similar numbers during this age frame.

Studies show that there are only a few *true* symptoms of menopause:

**Hot Flashes** – These are caused by sudden dilation of the blood vessels in the skin. This brings warm blood from the core of the body to the surface and is normally used as a cooling mechanism. Changing estrogen levels during menopause seem to short circuit the whole system. Hot flashes will usually last five minutes and can often leave a woman shivering and chilled.

**Night Sweats** – These are actually hot flashes that happen at night. Due to the fact that the natural body temperature is lower at rest, the proportional rise in temperature seems greater. The body is slower to react and the episode seems to last longer.

**Mood Swings** – It should be noted that mood swings are chemically related and they are in no way related to mental illness. If you understand that these events are *temporary* and they are related to the brain’s response to fluctuating estrogen levels, it can go a long way to coping with them.

**Vaginal Dryness** – This is a symptom that seems to affect about a third of women. In the absence of estrogen the lining of the vagina atrophies. Unfortunately, lifestyle changes do little to change this symptom.

Exercise, both aerobic and strength training, prove to be a healthy strategy to reduce the above symptoms. As well, an increase in lean muscle mass helps to maintain the metabolic rate and reduce the steady weight gain many experience. Weight bearing exercise is by far the best way to fight osteoporosis. Symptoms of depression can also be reduced with increased activity. A reduction in sugar, caffeine, alcohol, chocolate, hot or spicy foods, overeating, stress and a sedentary lifestyle can reduce menopausal

symptoms. Although it sounds silly, a positive attitude also goes a long way to manage menopause.

This is an exciting time for women; the start of a new 'you'. My advice is to make extra efforts in self care. By including metabolism-boosting activity and sound nutritional principles in your life, you may be feeling better than ever at an age when many are struggling.

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Shawna is shaking up the fitness routines of several people in her Adventure Boot Camps. For more information, please visit her website.