MENOPAUSE: MORE THAN JUST ESTROGEN

Dr. Arden Pinault MS, LAc, ND

Ever wonder why some women sail through menopause with little problem while other women seem plagued by a myriad of symptoms including hot flashes, drenching night sweats, mood swings, insomnia, fatigue, memory loss, joint pain and others? The answer to that question is not so simple, and certainly not answered by a drop in estrogen production alone.

Menopause is not a disease. It is a normal biological process that occurs at an average of age 50, however women can begin to experience fluctuations in hormones in their early 40's, a process known as perimenopause. Menopause is confirmed when menstrual periods cease for 12 months continuously. Menopause is not an estrogen deficiency state; it is a complex biochemical process that involves dozens of hormones and chemicals that effect the nervous, cardiovascular and endocrine systems.

During the menstrual years estrogen is made in the uterus while progesterone and testosterone are made in the ovaries. After menopause, fat cells and the adrenal glands take the responsibility for making these hormones. Women do not ever stop making these hormones but we do make less than the menstrual years. The adrenal glands are small triangular shaped glands that sit on each kidney. Each day they make over 200 chemicals such as catecholamines, cortisol, adrenaline, glucocorticoids, DHEA and many others. DHEA is an important precursor molecule to estrogen, progesterone and testosterone. How well the adrenal glands will make DHEA and these other hormones after menopause depends on many factors.

The adrenal glands produce chemicals that are involved in the "Fight or Flight" response. This is involved in our adaptation to stressful events. If the adrenal glands are continually forced to produce these anti-stress chemicals they may produce less of other needed hormones and chemicals. Prolonged stress in life has a wearing effect on the adrenal glands. Often with stress, poor nutrition, sleep disturbance or illness the adrenals become underactive.

I have often noticed clinically that women who have more menopausal symptoms are often the ones who have had more stresses in their lives. It is like menopause becomes a mirror for how her life has been previously. One thing that can be very helpful is to measure one's levels of these hormones to see if any correction is needed. Thyroid hormone is also often low with the changes of menopause. Correcting underlying hormonal imbalances are amazingly effective in helping women through the changing tide of menopause.

If you are interested in knowing more about your hormonal status talk with your primary health care provider.