

## **MENOPAUSE** – To Treat or Not to Treat? That Is the Question.

By Bruce Hoffman

Dr. Bruce Hoffman discusses the treatment of one of the most sensitive and controversial areas in medicine today: the period in life when we make the transition from adulthood to early middle age.

**The** female menopause and the male andropause is a period in life characterized by well-documented and specific biochemical changes, but it is also a time when the unconscious archetypes which whisper subtle direction to libidinous forces are undergoing massive restructuring.

No longer are we young parents motivated by the fantasy of a perfectly functional nuclear family wherein all four members interact with grace and goodwill; nor are we motivated by the seductive allure of empire building. We must patch together our series of broken dreams, betrayals, and disappointments and move into the next phase of forgiveness and reconciliation—the path of integration and individuation. This is all accomplished amidst the backdrop of falling levels of estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, and DHEA. Our skin wrinkles, our breasts and penises sag, our bones creak and groan, and that pot belly just won't go away no matter how much we resist the oatmeal bars at Starbucks.

Women at this stage of their lives say that the treatment of the menopausal years is yet another case of the medical profession medicalizing a natural transition. John Robbins, author of *Diet for a New America* and, more recently, *Reclaiming our Health*, says,

"Hormones are being passed out like candy. I think a generation of women is being brainwashed and their trust in their menopausal wisdom and their own bodies is being betrayed." He quotes a 1993 Gallup survey that found that 84 percent of American physicians' discussions with their patients about menopausal symptoms centered on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Fewer than two percent discussed natural approaches, such as diet, exercise, stress reduction, or smoking cessation—approaches that can go a long way toward directing the body's hormone production in a balanced and healthy direction.

When challenged with the observation that HRT has been shown to reduce the symptoms of menopause (which include irregular or absent menses, hot flashes or night sweats, decreased vaginal lubrication, mood swings, insomnia, depression, poor memory and decreased concentration, urinary incontinence, and decreased libido) as well as reduce the incidence of Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) and osteoporosis, as well as possibly decrease the risk of Alzheimer's disease and colon cancer, Robbins makes the very good point that these statistics are only relevant to those women whose lifestyles are unhealthy.

Women who eat a vegetarian diet, low in fat, high in fiber, don't smoke, get regular exercise, and who take good care of themselves obtain the same results without the use of HRT. It is not that estrogen doesn't reduce the risk of heart disease—it is just that there are other ways of going about it, natural ways that are less dangerous.

Robbins is referring to the very real increased risk of breast cancer. In 1995, the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that women who take estrogen for five years or more have a 30- to 40-percent increase in breast cancer. Long-term use of estrogen also raises the risk of fatal uterine cancer (if unopposed with progesterone) and ovarian cancer, and puts women at risk for increased liver and gallbladder disease.

Although following the course of nature is probably the most sensible thing to do, there are others who say that the late 20th and early 21st centuries are definitely not "natural" times. To stay as "natural" as possible, we have to work on it. In today's world, being natural doesn't happen naturally.

According to Dr. Jonathan Wright, a highly respected holistic physician from Tahoma, Washington, a woman won't even need to think about hormone replacement therapy at menopause if she

- had a mother who ate only whole natural foods with a full complement of nutrients during her pregnancies,

- who herself had no in-utero exposures to chlorination, fluoridation, pesticides, herbicides, artificial colors, flavors, or other artificial chemicals, or any artificially generated electromagnetic fields,
- was born with no exposure to anesthetics,
- was nursed until at least 10 to 12 months of age,
- grew up on the same whole natural-food diet, without any of the exposures noted above,
- got lots of sunshine and exercise while growing up.
- Continued with the same diet, exercise, sunshine exposure, and none of the unnatural exposures noted above throughout the rest of her life,
- and had no family history of osteoporosis, arteriosclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, or senile dementia.

He does, however, concede that there are some women who don't fall into the 'all natural' category, and who have been able to live into their nineties in good health having used no hormone replacement therapy at all.

Some remarkable statistics have recently emerged. Women by the age of 50 have experienced approximately 400 to 500 periods. Physiologically, women were not designed to experience that incredible number of hormonal cycling episodes. In North America, 100 years ago, the average number of births for every woman was 10.8. Today it is 1.8. Coupled with two to three years of breast feeding per child, the average woman in the 1800s experienced a mere 30 to 50 menstrual periods in her lifetime. Numerous pregnancies provide hormonal stabilization, with an associated decreased rate of ovarian and breast diseases and a decreased need for postmenopausal HRT. You'll never have to ponder over these imponderables again! What an easy choice.

The choice to supplement with hormones is a very complex one. A woman has to weigh all the risks and benefits against a backdrop of one's own philosophical world view. Even though one may have read all the available literature, consulted with one's M.D., naturopath, chiropractor, Chinese Medicine specialist, and psychic, and were supported in living according to one's own faith, inner guidance, and body wisdom, one may still have to resort to the words of Yogi Berra, the legendary New York Yankee catcher. "When you come to the fork in the road," he once said, "take it."

In *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan writes "Through our actions, we will create a new image of age-free and joyous, saying what we really think and feel at last-knowing more than we ever knew we knew, not afraid of what anyone thinks of us anymore, moving with wonder into that unknown future we have helped shape for the generations coming after us."

### **Some Suggestions for dealing with menopause**

1. Examine your lifestyle. No healing technique, drug, or supplement is a substitute for exercise and good nutrition.
2. Do your own research. Discuss with your doctor your symptom checklist and your family's medical history.
3. If you decide to proceed with hormone replacement therapy. Consider using hormone replacement which duplicates your pre-menopausal state. In healthy women under the age of 40 (who are not taking medication) recent research has shown that 90% of serum estrogens are estriol, 7% are estradiol, and 3% are estrone. Your local compounding physician will be able to make up a cream containing all 3 estrogens in their naturally - occurring proportions, known as Tri-Est.
4. Research and speak to your health-care provider about the use of *herbs*, specifically black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), chaste tree berry (*Vitexagnus castus*), wild yam (*Dioscorea villosa*), dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*) and licorice root (*Glycyrrhizza uralensis*). *Vitamins and minerals*, specifically Vitamins B, C, D and E, magnesium and calcium. *Essential fatty acids*, specifically evening primrose oil and flax seed oil.
5. Eat a natural, organic, whole food, plant-based diet, rich in soy products as much as possible.