

Herbal Support for Menopause

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Menopause is a natural transition. Transitions present different challenges and opportunities based on our cultural views, life experiences, economic situations, social circles, spiritual beliefs, physical health and mental abilities. Sexist attitudes towards anyone experiencing menopause is too prevalent in the modern western world. Reframing how we view and speak about menopause and ageing is paramount for all people to feel valued and empowered, no matter what age we are.

Common menopausal symptoms include mood swings, anxiety, heightened irritability, depression, memory loss, insomnia and sleep disruption, lowered libido, low self-esteem, vaginal dryness, dry skin and hair, joint pain and stiffness, abdominal weight gain, cardiovascular system changes and loss of bone density.

Sex and Stress Hormones

Hormones are the chemical messengers of the endocrine system. The two major controlling systems of the body are the endocrine system and the nervous system. The menstrual cycle occurs rhythmically because of the female reproductive hormones which are ebbing and flowing continuously until menopause. Estrogen and progesterone are two of the major sex hormones involved in the menstrual cycle and menopause.

Even after menopause, hormones are being processed in the adrenal glands, ovaries, and through other tissues including bones, muscle, fat, skin and the brain. A holistic approach to wellness that includes nourishing herbs, diet, regular exercise, relaxation, and meditation, helps ensure that the dance of our hormones continues in a balanced way throughout our lives.

Regular exercise, relaxation, time in nature, meditation and emotional support help alleviate common menopausal symptoms and offer a pathway for health and inner peace as we age. The following dietary and herbal suggestions support us during and beyond menopause.

Nourishing herbal teas/infusions: alfalfa leaf, calendula, Holy basil, lady's mantle leaf & flower, lavender, lemon balm, nettle leaf & seed, green milky oat seeds, red clover blossoms, spearmint

Bitter herbs help cool the liver and support liver function: artichoke leaf, blessed thistle, burdock root, dandelion root & leaf, fennel seed, milk thistle seed, motherwort and yellow dock root. Liver health is essential as it processes all the various hormones circulating in our blood stream and stores iron.

Our Emotional Balance is also connected to the liver. Traditional Chinese Medicine describes *liver disharmony* as symptoms of anger, irritability, frustration, depression, digestive upsets, PMS, irregular menstruation, lighter periods, amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea and infertility. Many of the emotional symptoms associated with PMS are also common throughout menopause. A few favorite herbs of mine for **easing liver disharmony** include Blue Vervain tincture, dandelion root & leaf tincture or tea, lavender glycerite, lemon balm glycerite, rose petal elixir and skullcap tincture or glycerite. Breathing meditation, relaxing foot baths, aromatherapy, walking in nature, wholesome diet & acupuncture are supportive.

As we age the body's moisture declines. Moistening herbs that support yin deficiency: Codonopsis root tincture or tea. Fresh green milky oat seed glycerite or tincture. Shatavari root powder. Solomon's seal root tincture or tea.

A nourishing, whole foods and phytoestrogen-rich diet: Eating less refined carbohydrates, sugar, caffeine and alcohol supports overall health, good liver function, mental clarity and vitality. Regular three meals daily that include good quality protein, balanced complex carbohydrates, bitter herbs before meals, high quality vegetable oils like olive oil & coconut oil, non-rancid nuts & seeds, plenty of dark green leafy and root vegetables & fruit (organic & local when possible), and drinking lots of clean water.

Phytoestrogen-rich plants, in their whole form (not from standardized supplements), have a much weaker action in the body (2 percent of what the body's natural estrogen does) but are essential in the diet as they bind to the body's estrogen receptor sites. The term phytoestrogen refers to specific chemicals naturally found in plants that act like estrogen. **Herbs and foods which contain phytoestrogens bind preferentially to the body's estrogen receptor sites.** This

binding process helps to reduce an overload of estrogen or offers some estrogen activity when estrogen levels become low- during menopause and post-menopause.

Phytoestrogen-rich plants include:

Compounds found in legume family (*Fabaceae*) plants: beans, fermented soy products-miso & tempeh, and **herbs** such as alfalfa leaf, licorice root, and red clover blossoms

Plants high in Lignans include: flax seeds and sesame seeds

Mint-family (*Lamiaceae*) aromatic plants: lavender, lemon balm, peppermint, rosemary, sage, and spearmint. These aromatic herbs also help to clear toxicity from the gut, clear the mind and improve memory.

Other sources of phytoestrogens include: hops, kudzu, shatavari root

Estrogen and Estrogen Receptor Sites

Estrogen is a term referring to 3 different estrogens: estradiol, estrone and estriol. These circulate throughout the body and exert a cumulative effect. Estradiol is the most biologically potent estrogen produced in the ovaries and in the adrenal glands. Once created, estrogen is then converted by the body into either a beneficial estrogen (2-hydroxyestrone) or a toxic estrogen (16-alpha-hydroxyestrone). It is believed in Eastern medicine that the conversion to either beneficial or toxic estrogens depends on:

- 1. The health of the liver.** The liver needs to be functioning optimally in order to properly detoxify the body. Liver function is adversely affected by poor diet, overeating, excessive intake of fats, sugar, alcohol, coffee and the additional burden of environmental toxins & pharmaceuticals.

- 2. How well the body's metabolic processes are functioning**-like digestion.

- 3. The body's overall energy/qi/ojas.** Our energy is associated with the health and vitality of the adrenal glands and our overall mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Around the age of 50 (or after surgical removal of ovaries) the adrenal glands take up the job of supplying estrogen and also provide biochemical precursors so our bodies can synthesize estrogen. Taking care of our stress and the health of our liver, digestion and adrenal glands is foundational for balancing our hormones and improving our energy levels. Tending these areas regularly is much more important

than just using herbs to relieve uncomfortable symptoms during our menstruating and menopausal years.

Adrenal Insufficiency Symptoms and Indications

We know that chronic stress leads to high levels of cortisol. High cortisol contributes to hormone imbalances that increase the risk of osteoporosis, accelerate aging and loss of muscle strength, and also keep the body in fight or flight mode. Being in fight or flight for long periods of time weakens the body's life force, compromises the immune system and contributes to memory loss, heart disease, high cholesterol and increased blood sugar. Excess cortisol also hinders the way insulin operates in the body, causing weight gain around the waste.

Minimizing the release of stress hormones, particularly adrenaline and cortisol, is key to preventing them from dominating and adversely affecting our bodies and minds. **This topic in itself is huge as there are so many social, environmental and racial justice issues that contribute to chronic stress.** When there are high levels of cortisol circulating in the body-especially for long periods of time-this leads to overall hormone resistance, including thyroid resistance. The body becomes desensitized to these stress hormones. The body then gets the message to make more hormones. Eventually the glands that produce different hormones, like the adrenals, get exhausted.

Some of the symptoms that point to adrenal exhaustion include being chronically tired, inability to sleep deeply or stay asleep, sugar cravings and cravings for other stimulants like caffeine, mood swings, poor cognitive skills, poor concentration, irritability, a quickness to anger, abdominal weight gain, constipation, anemia, and poor digestion-food is less able to be fully digested when the body is constantly in fight or flight mode. Other symptoms may include an unwillingness to communicate, social with-drawl or inability to stop talking about oneself. Feelings of melancholia may arise-touch of sadness that comes and goes a few days a week-this is different than depression. Grief also may surface and if it does gently massage around your navel counter clockwise in small circles to release grief and other emotions along with getting emotional support when needed. Heart breath.

Repeated and prolonged stress wears down the body. Adrenal exhaustion contributes to heightened stress and irritability, panic attacks, emotional vulnerability and night sweats. It also contributes to more serious conditions which are beyond the scope of this class but include insulin resistance (Syndrome X),

obesity, thyroid disorders, cardiovascular disease, impaired immunity, autoimmune disorders and major depression. I acknowledge that many people don't have access to good health care and this is a huge social justice issue that we all must help transform, step by step, in our communities. Access to respectful health care is a human right.

One of the simplest and most **nourishing herbal infusions** for people living with prolonged stress is made with **nettle leaf and oat seed**. Drink 2-4 cups/day over several weeks or months. I also place a dropperful of **Schisandra berry** and **Hawthorn Plus** (flower & berry) tinctures in my quart water bottle daily to support my overall energy, heart health and to build stress resiliency.

Adrenal fatigue: ashwagandha powder, astragalus root tincture, codonopsis root tincture, *Eleutherococcus senticosus* (Siberian ginseng) tincture, licorice root tea or tincture, *rhodiola root tincture*, schisandra berry tincture, shatavari root powder

Anxiety, general: ashwagandha root powder (*Withania somnifera*), blue vervain tincture (*Verbena hastata*), fresh green milky oat seed (*Avena sativa*), lavender glycerite (*Lavandula officinalis*), lemon balm glycerite (*Melissa officinalis*), motherwort tincture (*Leonurus cardiaca*), rose petal elixir (*Rosa rugosa*), shatavari root powder (*Asparagus racemosus*), fresh skullcap tincture or glycerite (*Scutellaria lateriflora*), St Johnswort tincture (*Hypericum perforatum*).

Cardiovascular support: hawthorn leaf, flower, berry tincture (*Crataegus species*), lemon balm glycerite, linden flower tea or tincture (*Tilia europea*, *T. americanus*), motherwort tincture, rose petal elixir (*Rosa rugosa*)

Mild depression accompanied with anxiety, poor memory and cognition: ashwagandha root powder, bacopa tincture (*Bacopa monnieri*), lavender glycerite, lemon balm glycerite, Lion's Mane mushroom tincture (*Hericium erinaceus*), rosemary tea or tincture (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), St Johnswort tincture, fresh skullcap tincture or glycerite

Hot flushes: black cohosh root tincture (*Actaea/Cimicifuga racemose*), blue vervain tincture, motherwort tincture (*Leonurus cardiaca*), rose petal elixir (*Rosa rugosa*), shatavari root powder, St Johnswort tincture (*Hypericum perforatum*), Solomon's seal root tincture

Night sweats: black cohosh (*Actaea/Cimicifuga racemosa*), Blue Vervain tincture, fresh green milky oat seed tincture or glycerite, schisandra berry tincture, shatavari root powder

Mood swings with mild depression and hot flushes: Black cohosh root tincture, chaste tree berry seed tincture (*Vitex agnus-castus*). Stop using Vitex once menstruation has stopped for six months.

Insomnia and sleep disturbances: Creating healthy sleep patterns and relaxing throughout the day-resetting the body's nervous system is key. Nightly herbal foot baths.

California poppy tincture (*Eschscholtzia californica*), chamomile tea (*Matricaria recutita*), hops tincture (*Humulus lupulus*), fresh green milky oat seed glycerite or tincture, passionflower tincture (*Passiflora incarnata*), fresh skullcap tincture or glycerite, and fresh valerian root tincture (*Valeriana officinalis*).

If you wake up during the night, take **nervine tonics** throughout the day for several months. Use **ashwagandha root** morning and after dinner over several months or a few years. **Relaxing foot baths before bed** with a few drops of pure essential oils of rose geranium, rose, lavender or lemon balm or chamomile, lavender and lemon balm tea. Create a nightly, healing rhythm.

Vaginal dryness: Supporting tissue integrity is key for addressing vaginal dryness and atrophy alongside the emotional implications that can occur. Use herbal tinctures and teas which nourish yin and help moisten tissues such as **codonopsis root, licorice root, shatavari root and solomon's seal root**. Some studies have shown that using **black cohosh root** for a minimum of 12 weeks helps increase vaginal mucosa.

Balance Your Hormones, Balance Your Life by Dr. Claudia Welch

Healing Herbs for Women by Deb Soule

If Women Rose Rooted: The Journey to Authenticity & Belonging, Sharon Blackie