

Hot-flash HELP *(and more)*

New natural treatments ease
perimenopause symptoms,
including insomnia, moodiness, and more

It has been just eight days since I blew out the candles on my 40th-birthday cake, yet I already have a nagging sense that something's changing. A few times a month, I wake up in a pool of sweat, where I lie wide-eyed for hours. In the days before my period, a sink full of dirty dishes can make me weep. And menses itself is often earlier, and heavier, than I expect. Surely, I'm too young for menopause. Right? Not necessarily.

"We've learned that women can actually start experiencing perimenopausal symptoms up to 10 years prior to menopause," says Laurie Steelsmith, ND, author of *Natural Choices for Women's Health* (Three Rivers, 2005). "Fortunately, I see a lot more focus today on helping women through this hormonal roller coaster using natural methods."

For decades, conventional medical advice went like this: Tough it out as long as possible, then go on synthetic hormone replacement therapy (HRT) that was believed to reduce risk for heart disease and osteoporosis. "Doctors basically gave the same hormones at the same dose to every woman," says Christiane Northrup, MD, author of *The Wisdom of Menopause* (Bantam, 2006). "Many women went on hormones when they started skipping periods, and they stayed on them forever."

BY LISA MARSHALL

But because of the government's bombshell 15-year Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study released in 2002—which linked synthetic estrogen (Premarin) and progestin (Provera) to an *increased* risk of heart disease and breast cancer in older, postmenopausal women—the one-size-fits-all pharmaceutical approach has been replaced by one that emphasizes more natural interventions, undertaken earlier. A 2008 study found that 80 percent of women now use complementary and alternative medicine to lessen perimenopausal symptoms. And a growing number of physicians are recommending bioidentical hormones (which more closely resemble women's own), contending they may be safer.

"For some women, using hormone therapy as a bridge can still be a helpful intervention," says Shelley Wroth, MD, an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Duke University Medical Center. "For others, there are great studies that show just how much of an impact relaxation strategies, acupuncture, exercise, and diet can have." Consider these remedies for the most common symptoms.



Insomnia and mood swings

These are among the earliest signs of perimenopause, caused when your ovaries cut back on production of progesterone, a natural sedative.

{ NATURAL REMEDIES }

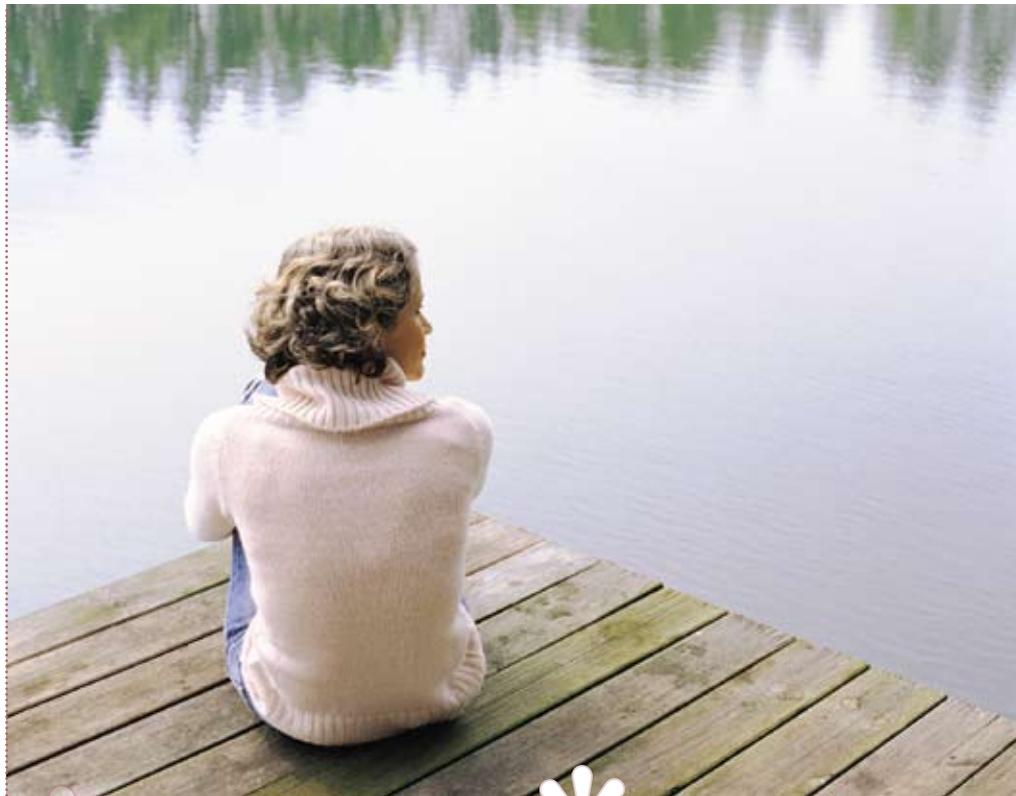
To boost progesterone, Northrup recommends rubbing $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of 2 percent bioidentical progesterone cream (available by prescription or over-the-counter) onto your arms, thighs, or stomach nightly for at least two to three weeks each month. Or, try the herb chasteberry (*Vitex agnus castus*), a plant with progesterone-like properties that is believed to bind to progesterone receptors in the body. A 2010 study of 67 Chinese women found that those who took standardized vitex daily for three cycles reported far more improvements in hormone-related symptoms, especially insomnia and moodiness, than the placebo group. Steelsmith recommends 175 mg of standardized powdered extract, or 40 drops of liquid daily. Other milder progesterone-mimicking herbs include turmeric, thyme, and oregano. All are available in capsule or tincture form. ➤

Are bioidentical hormones safer?

When the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study concluded in 2002 that postmenopausal women using synthetic estrogen-progestin had higher rates of heart disease and breast cancer, "people stopped cold-turkey overnight and were scared to death," says Christiane Northrup, MD. "Many were left with insomnia, intolerable hot flashes, and a decreased quality of life." But, she points out, the study focused on women ten years *past* their last period, and only looked at Premarin (an artificial estrogen made from pregnant mares' urine) and Provera (a synthetic progestin). "Bioidentical hormones were not studied at all," she says.

Bioidentical hormones are typically plant-based (from sterols found in yams, soybeans, and other plants) and are manufactured in labs to be chemically identical to those produced in the body. Some are standardized and approved by the FDA; others are custom-compounded in a pharmacy, based on an individual woman's hormonal needs. Although the medical community is far from convinced, some studies suggest bioidenticals may be safer. One study followed 80,000 newly postmenopausal women in France for eight years and found that those taking bioidentical estrogen had significantly less risk of breast cancer than those on synthetic estrogen. Large multicenter trials are underway to further investigate bioidenticals' impact on other health risks.





Is it perimenopause?

Although every woman's experience is different, studies show about 15 percent of women sail through "the change" with no symptoms. For others, mild symptoms start as early as 40 and persist for years during **perimenopause**, the stage leading up to the last menstrual period. First come dipping progesterone levels, which can lead to insomnia, tender breasts, and irritability. Then, as ovaries produce less estrogen—typically around the mid-to-late 40s—70 percent of women experience hot flashes. Around age 51, as you approach true **menopause** (defined as the day you've gone a full year without menstruating), estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone plummet, often leading to vaginal dryness, brain fog, and a crescendo of discomfort before hormones level off and symptoms subside in **postmenopause**.



Fatigue

Your adrenals (two energizing glands atop your kidneys) may be fried from years of churning out cortisol and adrenaline, the body's main stress hormones. Adrenal fatigue is particularly problematic in perimenopause because these glands also produce estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone as your ovaries slack off. When overtaxed, adrenals will preferentially produce stress hormones over sex hormones, which can worsen perimenopause symptoms.

{ NATURAL REMEDIES }

To check adrenal health, ask your doctor for an Adrenal Stress Index, a saliva test. Then take a good look at your diet. "One of the most important things you can do to support your adrenals is stabilize your blood sugar," says Steelsmith. Erratic blood sugar levels prompt even more cortisol production, so go easy on sweets and other refined carbohydrates, stop skipping meals, and eat plenty of protein, a natural blood-glucose stabilizer. Also, consider taking 500 mg of pantothenic acid (B5) and 1,000 mg of vitamin C twice a day. These building blocks for adrenal hormones tend to be flushed out under stress.



Hot flashes

Women's health experts say hot flashes are probably caused by radical dips in estrogen. But supplemental estrogen—still considered the gold standard for treatment—is associated with increased breast cancer risk.

{ NATURAL REMEDIES }

By far the most studied natural remedy is black cohosh, a phytoestrogen (a plant with estrogenlike properties). Although overall data is mixed, one 2006 study of 301 women found that those who took black cohosh for 16 weeks saw hot flashes drop 50 percent while the placebo group saw a 20 percent drop. Try 20–80 mg twice a day of standardized extract, says Wroth.

Soy is another promising phytoestrogen. Researchers have long suspected that one reason Japanese women have fewer hot flashes is because of their high soy intake, and a growing body of evidence bolsters this hypothesis.

Twelve weekly acupuncture sessions—or a twice-daily, 20-minute deep-breathing practice—also can cut hot flashes significantly, according to recent studies. ➤



Vaginal dryness

Because vaginal tissue depends on estrogen to remain moist and elastic, the hormonal nosedive at menopause often leads to a thinning and drying of tissue, making women more prone to yeast and urinary infections and painful sex.

{ NATURAL REMEDIES }

Steelsmith recommends vitamin E vaginal suppositories (available over-the-counter at most pharmacies), Kegel pelvic-floor exercises to bring blood flow to the area, and plenty of sex to restore elasticity. “If you don’t use it, you lose it,” she says. The Asian botanical *Pueraria mirifica*, also known as Thai kudzu, also has been shown to relieve vaginal dryness, in some cases better than Premarin. Look for a product with the standardized active ingredient miroestrol. Typical dose is 50–80 mg daily. Northrup recommends applying 0.5 mg of the topical bioidentical estrogen, estriol, to the vagina; talk with your health care provider before starting treatment.

HRT and age: Is younger better?

A growing body of research suggests that when synthetic or bioidentical hormones are used in younger women (ages 49 to 59) during perimenopause or shortly after, they tend to work better—particularly for boosting memory—and they seem to carry less risk. In March 2010, the North American Menopause Society (NAMS) actually revised its position statement on hormone therapy, saying the benefits may outweigh the risks for younger women. “It appears that the risk of heart disease in women using hormones is largely confined to older women,” says NAMS president Cynthia Stuenkel, MD.



Brain fog

A 2009 University of California study of 2,362 women ages 42 to 52 found that 60 percent suffered memory and mental-processing problems. The good news: According to the study, cognitive function tends to return to premenopausal levels after menopause.

{ NATURAL REMEDIES }

Try 2,000 mg of omega-3 fatty acids daily, including both docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). DHA is believed to promote production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, a hormone that helps neurons function better and fuels brain-cell growth. One 2009 study of 485 healthy adults found those who took 900 mg per day of DHA for six months made “significantly fewer errors” on memory tests than at the study’s onset. Another 2009 study found that perimenopausal women who took 1,000 mg of EPA daily for eight weeks saw psychological distress and mild depression lift. Finally, get moving. “Research shows the more people exercise, the better their brains function,” says Wroth.

Top 5 supplements for menopause-symptom relief

TRY	BENEFITS	DOSE
Black cohosh	A 2010 meta-analysis found that in six out of nine trials, products containing black cohosh worked better than a placebo to relieve hot flashes.	20 mg of extract standardized to 1 mg of total saponins per dose, twice daily
Chasteberry (vitex)	One 2007 study of 50 women ages 44 to 65 found those who took a product containing vitex saw a 69 percent decrease in night sweats.	20–120 mg daily
Maca	Shown in some small studies to enhance sex drive and boost memory.	300 mg daily
<i>Pueraria mirifica</i> (PM)	An Asian herb used for centuries to combat vaginal dryness, insomnia, and hot flashes.	50–80 mg of a standardized extract with miroestrol daily
Soy	Compounds in soy are believed to behave like estrogen in the body; shown in numerous studies support soy’s ability to lessen hot flashes, improve sexual health, and curb bone loss.	30–90 grams powdered soy isoflavone extract daily. Stick to 20 grams daily if you have a history of breast cancer.

Sources: Hyla Cass, MD; Christiane Northrup, MD.

Life after menopause

Perhaps the most intimidating symptom facing women entering perimenopause is fear—a fear “they are going to come out of it old and wrinkled and lacking vitality,” says Steelsmith. That’s far from reality. Symptoms typically subside within three years of the last period. The emotional highs and lows and discomforts that accompanied menstrual cycles are replaced by a more even keel. And thanks to shifts in wiring in the temporal lobe (associated with intuition) and permanently elevated levels of follicle-stimulating hormone and luteinizing hormone—which previously spiked only at ovulation—many postmenopausal women report a renewed mental clarity.

So enjoy the ride, advises Northrup. “What we have to lose is not nearly so valuable as what we have to gain.” ■

Health writer Lisa Marshall is a frequent contributor to *Delicious Living*.



For more natural approaches to menopause, go to deliciousliving.com/oct10.