

# holistic menopause remedies.

Feel like you're on a hormonal rollercoaster? Naturopath [Louise O'Connor](#) shows you how to make sense of your ups and downs – and beat the menopause blues.

**T**he dynamic interplay of hormones keeps you feeling young and vibrant – or not, as the case may be. As a woman, your hormone levels begin to change around your mid 30s: both progesterone and oestrogens levels start to decline, progesterone more rapidly. Menopausal symptoms may continue through to your late 40s or early 50s if there is an imbalance of oestrogens and progesterone (see “Know Your Hormones”).

## Thrive through menopause

Menopause is an important life transition for women. However, it is also a time when hormone fluctuations can cause fatigue, mood disorders, insomnia, hot flashes, vaginal dryness, or decreased interest in sex.

For decades hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was regarded as first line treatment to protect women from ageing. Along with HRT came the notion that menopause is a ‘disease’ with symptoms that can be fixed with synthetic hormones. In 2002, concerns were raised about HRT with the publication of the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) study.<sup>1</sup>

The investigators concluded that HRT’s adverse effects outweighed its benefits. In 2005 The World Health Organisation’s International Agency for Research and Cancer (IARC) classified menopausal therapy as “carcinogenic to humans”.<sup>2</sup>

As a naturopath, I recommend that my clients restore their hormones to the level nature intended, not replace them with synthetic substitutes that pose risks. Hormone balance is your body’s natural, healthy state. When menopausal symptoms do strike, safe and effective natural remedies can restore this balance.

## Natural medicine can help

**1. Ageing.** Diet directly impacts hormone balance. Conventionally produced foods contain ingredients that disrupt hormones and accelerate ageing. The top five toxic ingredients that I think all women should avoid are: sugars, ‘plastic’ trans fats, caffeine, vegetable oils (canola and soy oil) and dangerous artificial sweeteners. Choose healthy foods and exercise regularly to create healing and harmony.

## TAKE THE TEST

Women have an innate wisdom about their own bodies and are keenly aware when their hormones are out of sync. When testing, it is impossible to consider one hormone in isolation. Your hormones are inter-connected so it makes sense to do a complete assessment. In my experience, a non-invasive saliva hormone test is an accurate way to gain an insight into what is really going on. Testing provides a clear picture of the hormones that are active in your body and quickly identifies a potential imbalance. My recommended women’s wellness test includes seven hormones: progesterone, testosterone, DHEA, cortisol, and the three forms of oestrogen. Knowing your levels will help you take steps to regain hormone control.



ILLUSTRATION: JIM TSINGANOS

## HELP, I'M LOSING MY HAIR!

As oestrogen drops, you may notice thinning hair. Hair loss is also associated with some medical conditions, drugs or stress. It is vital to check for hypothyroidism (an under-active thyroid); new research shows that thyroid hormones activate hair follicles to generate new growth and prevent premature greying.<sup>7</sup> Hypothyroidism affects more women than men. It leads to fatigue, foggy thinking, hair loss and depression. Symptoms of an under-active thyroid are often overlooked in menopause.

## KNOW YOUR HORMONES

Pregnenolone is the true 'mother hormone' and sits at the top of the hormone cascade. Pregnenolone converts through to dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), progesterone, testosterone and the three forms of oestrogen. Each hormone is interrelated, ruling unique biological activity. The hormones governing women's health are the oestrogens, progesterone and testosterone.

Oestrogens include oestradiol (E2), oestrone (E1) and oestriol (E3).

Oestradiol is the most potent and protects against osteoporosis and heart disease. In menopause, the ovaries slow oestradiol production and oestrone becomes the principal oestrogen. Oestrone is the form that is most stimulating to breast tissue and the reason why women's risk of breast cancer peaks at this time. Oestriol is protective and is thought to be anti-carcinogenic. Testosterone gives women mental sharpness, energy and boosts sex drive.

### Oestrogen decline:

Phytoestrogens are naturally occurring oestrogen-like compounds that bind to oestrogen receptors and act in a similar way to oestrogens. Plants rich in phytoestrogens may relieve menopausal symptoms. Black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), soy isoflavones (*Glycine max*) and wild yam (*Dioscorea villosa*) are prominent phytoestrogens. Black cohosh provides broad support for hot flushes, profuse sweating, insomnia, and anxiety.<sup>13,14</sup> According to a new meta-analysis, soy and red clover isoflavones offer real relief to post menopausal women and pose no safety issues.<sup>15</sup>

**Oestrogen dominance:** Diindolylmethane (DIM) is a naturally occurring phytonutrient found in cruciferous vegetables. Scientists have demonstrated DIM's ability to promote greater breakdown and clearance of oestrogens to reduce symptoms of oestrogen dominance. New research is investigating the role of bioavailable DIM in serious breast disease.<sup>16</sup>



**2. Blood sugar imbalances.** Reduced blood sugar control is associated with the development of obesity, diabetes, and cancer. Chromium is a trace mineral that can assist healthy blood sugar metabolism. You may also find that it reduces persistent sugar cravings and helps you lose weight. When you eat sugar-laden foods the sugar is stored as body fat if it cannot be burned for energy.

**3. Depression.** Fish oils are the ideal source of essential 'good fats', the omega-3 oils which keep cholesterol in check, reduce inflammation, keep your brain sharp and relieve depression.<sup>3,4</sup> St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) is prized worldwide as a natural medicine to treat mild to moderate depression. Studies show that St. John's wort preparations may be just as effective as antidepressant medications.<sup>5</sup> Rhodiola (*Rhodiola rosea*) has been used for centuries in Russia and Scandinavia to boost energy and treat nervous disorders.<sup>6</sup>

**4. Fatigue.** A high potency women's multivitamin mineral supplement is especially important. Look for one high in B vitamins that provide energy. This acts as a nutritional insurance policy, topping up what may be missing in your daily diet. Add magnesium and coenzyme Q10 to support nervous system function.

**5. Hot flushes.** The cooling and calming properties of traditional herbs like sage (*Salvia officinalis*), dong quai (*Angelica polymorpha*) and shatavari (*Asparagus lucidus*) reduce hot flushes and night sweats.

**6. Insomnia.** Lack of sleep is linked to hypertension, obesity, anxiety and depression.<sup>8</sup> Further, insomnia and interrupted sleep patterns are especially common during

perimenopause and are strongly associated with the use of sleeping medications, which can have adverse effects.<sup>9</sup> Melatonin regulates your biological clock naturally.

In supplemental form it assists restorative sleep. It is also important to eliminate sources of caffeine, like coffee and soft drinks.

**7. Immune health.** Vitamin D3 is in the spotlight for healthy ageing as it safeguards against inappropriate cell division of ageing cells. Vitamin D expert Dr Cedric Garland of Moores Cancer Center, University of California, San Diego says, "No other method to prevent cancer has been identified that has such a powerful impact."<sup>10</sup> A study in *Nutrition Research* has shown that women lacking D3 are more likely to die from heart disease and cancer.<sup>11</sup> Supplemental D3 can raise levels in those who are at risk of a deficiency.

**8. Low libido.** Reduced testosterone and oestrogen conspire to dampen your sexual desire. There is the added problem of vaginal dryness which causes painful intercourse. Maca (*Lepidium meyenii*) is an ancient Peruvian superfood that has a reputation for being a natural aphrodisiac. Acupuncture also helps build vitality: this ancient therapy facilitates the opening of blocked energy channels, allowing chi (life force energy) to flow freely.

**9. Mood swings.** Mood swings are often encountered with fluctuating hormone levels. 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) is a direct precursor to serotonin, your 'feel good' brain chemical. Supplemental 5-HTP boosts natural serotonin production to have positive effects on emotions,

appetite regulation, and sleep.<sup>12</sup> GABA is your major anti-anxiety brain chemical that puts the brakes on stress; PharmaGABA® is an all-natural stress aid that reduces anxiety.

**10. Osteoporosis.** Oestrogens protect against bone loss so HRT is often touted to treat menopausal bone loss. However, do the benefits outweigh the risks? Bone loss is accelerated by acidic foods like alcohol, soft drinks, tea, coffee and a high protein diet.

Save bone strength naturally by eating a low acid diet high in plant-based foods, and performing regular weight-bearing exercise.

**11. Stress.** Stress signals your adrenal glands to pump out cortisol, the 'fight-or-flight' hormone. *Rehmannia* (*Rehmannia glutinosa*) is the supreme adrenal tonic to combat stress. *Withania* (*Withania somnifera*) has long been used by Ayurvedic practitioners as a rejuvenating tonic. It is an adaptogenic herb that improves your ability to deal with stress. Exercise, meditation and yoga are also powerful antidotes.

**12. Weight gain.** Women often report that with menopause they gain apple-shaped weight. If you exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, and still struggle to lose weight, a hormone imbalance may be setting you up for an ongoing cycle of weight gain. A natural health practitioner can guide you to real solutions to shed the weight.

In many cultures menopause is viewed as an important rite of passage, one where women's wisdom is honoured.



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WHAT DO YOU THINK? Share your opinions and experiences on this topic. Email [editor@natureandhealth.com.au](mailto:editor@natureandhealth.com.au)

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