Menopause and complementary therapies

Summary

- Some women choose complementary therapies to manage menopausal symptoms.
- Not all of these therapies have been proven to be effective.
- Popular therapies include phytoestrogens and herbal medicines.
- When using natural therapies, it’s important to get advice from a health practitioner trained in their use.
- Always tell your doctor if you are taking any complementary medicines.

Menopause is the end of menstruation (periods) in a woman's life, when the ovaries stop releasing eggs. Some women have unpleasant menopausal symptoms and so use complementary therapies to manage these symptoms.

Complementary therapies

'Natural therapy', 'complementary therapy', 'complementary medicine' and 'alternative therapy' are all natural or complementary therapies or medicines.

Complementary therapies are healthcare practices, therapies, procedures and devices not within the field of conventional medicine.

In Australia, complementary therapies include, but are not limited to:

- acupuncture
- aromatherapy
- chiropractic
- homeopathy
- massage
- meditation and relaxation therapies
- naturopathy
- osteopathy
- reflexology
- traditional Chinese medicine
- vitamin and mineral supplements.

Complementary medicine usually means a non-mainstream approach being used together with conventional medicine. Alternative medicine refers to a non-mainstream approach instead of conventional medicine.

Using complementary therapies safely

Many people use complementary therapies without first checking with a health practitioner. They may do this because they think the therapies are 'natural' and so there's no harm in taking them. However, complementary medicines can have side-effects or interact with other medications. Or people may take the wrong type of therapy, and miss out on the right type of medical care.

If you want to use complementary therapies, be informed about the type of treatment you choose. Make sure you are advised by a healthcare practitioner trained in natural therapies. They can prescribe appropriately and know when to refer you for medical treatment.

Some complementary therapies are regulated under the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency.

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Complementary therapies that are not regulated by AHPRA are unregistered professions in Australia. They are self-regulated by their own professional associations. Standards of education and levels of expertise can vary a lot.

Always tell your doctor if you are taking any complementary medicines.

Menopause, exercise and diet

Many women are troubled by menopausal symptoms including hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness and psychological symptoms.

No supplement therapy can fully replace regular physical activity and a healthy diet, which are both essential to general good health. The Australian Government’s Physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines recommend you:

- do 150 to 300 minutes of moderate physical activity, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous physical activity each week
- do muscle-strengthening activities at least two days each week.
- avoid long periods of sitting and, if you can’t, take breaks from sitting as often as possible.

If you are in the postmenopausal age group you are at increased risk of developing:

- cardiovascular disease
- type 2 diabetes
- osteoporosis.

Moderate exercise and a healthy diet help to reduce the risk of developing these diseases.

High-impact exercise – such as running, skipping, jumping, hopping, high-impact aerobics and team sports such as netball – and resistance-type activities (strength training) can help improve your bone mineral density.

Calcium, vitamin D and menopause

You are at increased risk of bone fractures and osteoporosis at menopause. This is because the drop in oestrogen at menopause can speed up bone loss. Having enough calcium and vitamin D is important as you need calcium for building bone, and vitamin D to help your body absorb calcium.

After menopause you need 1,300 mg of calcium per day. Ideally, this should be from high-calcium food such as milk (dairy or fortified alternatives), canned fish with bones, yoghurt, spinach, broccoli and almonds. If you can’t achieve this amount with diet alone, you may need calcium supplements.

There is inconsistent evidence about the association between calcium supplements and risk of cardiovascular (heart) disease. Concerns have been raised that supplements over 1,000 mg daily may increase the risk. However, there does not appear to be an increased risk of heart attack in people who obtain their calcium from diet alone.

If you are taking calcium supplements (especially if you have osteoporosis or are taking medications for osteoporosis), do not stop taking them without first consulting your doctor.

Vitamin D is important for bone health, as it helps calcium to be absorbed. The main source of vitamin D in Australia is the sun; however, many Australians do not have adequate vitamin D levels. In fact, about one third of all Australians over 25 years of age are vitamin D deficient. Vitamin D deficiency has been observed in nearly two thirds of Australian women.

If you are vitamin D deficient, your doctor may recommend that you take supplements. The dose of vitamin D supplementation varies, depending on your individual levels and requirements. Vitamin D supplements of at least

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800 IU are recommended. You may be prescribed a higher dose if you have moderate to severe vitamin D deficiency.

**Phytoestrogens and menopause**

**Phytoestrogens** are plant compounds that are similar in chemical makeup to the 'female' sex hormone oestrogen, but are generally weaker. They act at the oestrogen receptor sites in a woman's body and may reduce menopausal symptoms in some women.

Phytoestrogens can be found in foods and also in supplements. The three types of phytoestrogens are:

- **Isoflavones** – good sources include soy products (tofu, tempeh, soy beans), beans (such as lima beans, chickpeas and lentils) and red clover
- **Lignans** – good sources include flaxseed (also called linseed), fruit, vegetables and grains
- **Coumestans** – good sources include sprouting seeds such as alfalfa.

If you are at high risk for breast cancer, or are a breast cancer survivor, you are advised not to take highly processed soy supplements (such as soy protein isolate, isoflavone-rich soy extracts or isoflavone capsules).

**Herbal medicines and menopause**

More research is needed to understand how effective herbal medicines are in managing menopause symptoms.

The best way to use herbal medicines is to have them prescribed by a trained natural therapist. This is because herbs are medicines.

Some complementary medicines, such as St John's wort (Hypericum perforatum), may interact with other medication you are taking, causing potentially harmful side effects. A herbalist or naturopath may prescribe one of many remedies to help manage menopausal symptoms such as:

- sleep disturbance
- mood changes
- libido changes
- hot flushes
- night sweats.

A herbal medicine prescription is made to suit your needs, rather than being a 'one size fits all' formula available to everyone.

Read more about **Menopause and herbs**.

**Complementary therapies – look for reputable information**

There is a lot of information available about complementary or alternative menopause treatments. Some of this information comes from unreliable sources. Some of the remedies that are promoted to women are not recommended by natural therapists, or have been shown not to work.

Complementary therapies are often based on traditional knowledge. Some have not had the testing that pharmaceutical medicines are subjected to during clinical trials. For this reason, the effectiveness of some complementary therapies has not been as strongly proven.

The increasing use of complementary therapies has begun to fuel scientific research and there is now scientific evidence about the safety and effectiveness of some therapies.

You can find reputable information through:

- your doctor or pharmacist
- other health services – such as Jean Hailes for Women’s Health
- health brochures in your local hospital, doctor's office or community health centre
- telephone helplines such as NURSE-ON-CALL
- medical journals

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- government health websites
- condition-specific sites – such as the Australasian Menopause Society
- support organisation sites.

Read more about finding reliable health information.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Naturopath, herbalist or complementary health practitioner
- **Jean Hailes for Women’s Health** Tel. 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)
- **National Herbalists Association of Australia** Tel. (02) 9797 2244
- **Australian Natural Therapists Association** Tel. 1800 817 577
- **NPS Medicinewise** – Medicines Line. Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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