

Ayurvedic Recommendations for Menopause

Recently, I have been talking to a lot of women going through the transition toward menopause. Many are experiencing many troublesome health problems which the media and doctors have them believing are a normal part of this process. I have written this brief article to help women understand that they do not need to experience pain, mood swings, or other troubles during this time. Ayurveda has many good recommendations for maintaining health and balance during perimenopause.

The Causes of the Symptoms of Menopause

Menopause is the time in life for women when menstruation stops. This is a natural cycle of life for all women. People have the wrong idea that the perimenopause transition before menstruation stops must be painful and difficult. Wikipedia says about menopause, "Before menopause, a woman's periods are usually irregular. Around menopause there are often hot flashes which typically last 30 seconds to ten minutes and may be associated with shivering, sweating and reddening of the skin. Typically, hot flashes stop occurring after a year or two. Other symptoms may include: vaginal dryness, trouble sleeping, and mood changes. The severity of symptoms varies between women." Western doctors have not yet understood the causes of these symptoms and therefore misunderstand them to be a normal part of this transition. Ayurveda teaches that irregular menstruation and other symptoms associated with menopause are not normal but that they result from an imbalance of the doshas due to stress and unhealthy lifestyle and diet over the years.

According to Ayurveda, the most common symptoms of menopause are caused by an excess of vata and pitta dosha. Symptoms like irregularity of periods, changeable body temperature, cramps, shivering, dryness, loss of skin tone, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, mood swings, constipation, bloating, weight loss, and joint pains are all caused by high vata. Symptoms like anger, irritability, excess body temperature, hot flashes, night sweats, heavy periods, urinary tract infections, rashes and acne are signs that an excess of pitta is affecting a person. Though the symptoms of vata and pitta are most common for women around the time of menopause, it is also possible for kapha to increase at this time. The excess of kapha during perimenopause would tend to cause dullness, lethargy, depression, laziness, yeast infections, lack of motivation, weak digestion, fluid retention, and regular, but late, menstruation. Any of these symptoms are a sure sign of an imbalance of the doshas caused by years of bad habits. They can lead to a variety of more serious health concerns including osteoporosis, heart disease, anemia, rapid aging and many others.

Diet for Menopause

In general, Ayurveda recommends a vata and pitta balancing diet to help reduce the symptoms of menopause. In general this would include avoiding raw foods, eating regular and frequent meals of warm cooked food. The main taste for balancing vata and pitta is the sweet taste. Important dietary sources of this taste include dairy, grains, root vegetables, nuts, fruits and

seeds. Excess of confections and refined sugars should be avoided. Milk is considered the ideal food to help counter the symptoms of menopause. It should be organic and raw according to Ayurveda. Natural whole milk rather than low-fat milk is considered easiest to absorb. Herbal formulas are often cooked into milk to help treat the symptoms of menopause. Milk has qualities like no other food substance to provide needed strength to the body at this time. It is a great source of calcium which helps to prevent osteoporosis. Ghee is also a very good food which helps to increase digestion when taken in moderation and which nourishes and moisturizes the body. Next to milk, natural whole grains are perhaps the best food for balancing the doshas during menopause. Among the grains, rice and wheat are best. They have a grounding and nourishing effect on the body to help stabilize moods and body temperature. Grounding, nourishing root vegetables like carrots and beets are an excellent source of iron. Eating more bitter and astringent foods like vegetables and legumes may be useful especially if there are signs of pitta like sweating, excess heat, heavy periods, rashes, and anger. Small meals should be taken at regular times 3 to 4 times a day. Snacking between meals and eating late at night should be avoided. Avoiding cold food and drink, ice, and very hot foods is also helpful.

Avoiding tea, coffee, and alcohol is recommended. Adding more mild digestive spices to foods will help increase digestion and absorption. These include cumin, fennel, coriander, cardamom, turmeric, mint, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Especially with heavy and gassy foods like leafy greens, beans and cabbage family foods like broccoli, kale, collards, cauliflower, and Brussel sprouts, it is important that they be well cooked with plenty of digestive spices. Many fruits are light and dry. They should be cooked with ghee and cardamom or cinnamon. Bananas are a good source of potassium. Sunflower seeds and sesame seeds are both good foods at this time. Generally meat is very heavy to digest and should be taken in moderation if it is consumed. Liver and eggs in particular can be useful at this time if the body is depleted, but is not necessary otherwise. One serving of meat or egg in a week would be enough for a relatively healthy person, but if there is extreme debilitation, this could be increased to 3-5 servings of meat or eggs per week. More than this is too heavy for most people to digest unless they do extremely hard physical labor. It may be necessary to have the doshas evaluated by an Ayurvedic practitioner if there is uncertainty as to which doshas are causing difficulties in an individual condition. When kapha dosha is involved, it will be necessary to avoid meat, cheese, and cold foods and to increase pungent spices.

Lifestyle Recommendations

Getting to sleep early, before 10 pm and keeping a regular schedule is very useful during menopause. Starting to wind down early in the evening, perhaps around 7 pm is beneficial. Attending late night events or working late into the night should be avoided. Regular, gentle exercise is useful like a calming walk in the park. Daily, full-body oil massage (abhyanga) before bathing is very helpful. Nourishing sesame oil can be used for vata or cooling coconut oil for pitta. Keeping the body hydrated by drinking warm (not cold or hot) liquids throughout the day is helpful. Stress is an unavoidable part of life, but there are things which can be done to help counter the effects of stress. Regular, gentle yoga, and meditation are helpful. Taking

some time to enjoy life and appreciate natural beauty is useful. Getting a massage, taking a nice relaxing bath, or going to the park and enjoying nature are helpful. Gentle pranayama can also be useful; alternate nostril breathing for vata or shitali breathing for pitta. Mantra practice is very good also. Practicing giving up worrying or anger is also helpful. Keeping positive uplifting people around can be a good influence in this regard. Of course avoiding needless drama and stressful situations is wise whenever possible. Irregular meals, eating on the run, eating foods bad for your doshas will tend to make symptoms worse, so it is wise to set aside time to eat freshly made, healthy, dosha-specific meals slowly and mindfully.

Herbs for Menopause

Cool tonic herbs which nourish the body and nervous system, increase body tissue, and moisturize the body are called for. These include shatavari, bala, musali (black or white), black cohosh, comfrey root, marshmallow, solomoneal, and slippery elm. Shatavari is one of the best Ayurvedic herbs for menopause. It helps balance vata and pitta while increasing the body's natural hormone production. Ashvagandha is good when there is high vata, anxiety, or trouble sleeping. Cooling and calming nervine herbs like jatamamsi (*Nardostachys jatamansi*) are also excellent. Jatamamsi reduces hot flashes, and mood swings and helps clear excess pitta and vata from the nervous system and mind. Certain traditional Ayurvedic formulas are indicated. Shatavari gudam or shatavari ghee is good, 1 tsp per day taken with milk. These are two of the best ways to take shatavari. To promote healthy digestion hingvashtak powder is good for vata or avipatti powder for pitta (1/4 tsp can be taken with water after meals). Kumari asav is a special herbal wine which is good for vata and pitta. It increase digestion, promotes normal menstruation and cleanses toxins from the system. It is taken 1 - 2 Tbsp. twice per day after meals. Chandraprabha is an ancient formula which is suitable for all three doshas. It reduces the effects of stress and aging and promotes healthy digestion, metabolism, menstruation, and elimination. It should be according to package instructions (as size of pills may vary). If there are urinary infections, gokshuradi guggulu may be used. For insomnia, nutmeg boiled in milk, or equal parts of jatamamsi, ashwagandha, shatavari, and nutmeg boiled in milk can be used (1/4 tsp. each per cup of milk). This is also useful for anxiety. For hot flashes, shatavari and jatamamsi in milk is useful (1/2 tsp each). Or the special Ayurvedic rose petal jam, gulkhand, may be taken (1 tsp.) with milk. To reduce sweating, shatavari, jatamamsi, mint, sage, and sandalwood can be taken in milk (1/4 tsp each). For delayed menstruation or menstrual cramps, musta (*Cyperus rotundus*), cinnamon, shatavari, saffron, and nutmeg can be taken with milk (1 pinch of saffron and 1/4 tsp. each of the other herbs). For heavy menstruation and anger, chamomile may be combined with ginger, shatavari, raspberry leaf, and turmeric, and taken with aloe gel (1/4 tsp. powdered herbs in 1 Tbsp aloe gel). To increase digestion and absorption, tea can be made from mint, rose petals, fennel, cumin, and cloves and sipped warm throughout the day. For joint pain, yogaraj guggulu may be taken according to package instructions. Or galangal root, angelica, ashvagandha and cardamom may be steeped in boiling (1/4 tsp each per cup). For mood swings, ashvagandha, jatamamsi, shankhapushpi, and calamus may be taken with milk (1/4 tsp each). To increase strength and energy and to improve digestion and elimination in general, the herbal jam, chyavan prash can be taken 1 – 2 tsp in the morning with warm milk.

These herbal recommendations will provide some relief from symptoms, but cannot replace a proper diet and lifestyle. Living a dosha-balancing lifestyle, maintaining a regular schedule, and practicing stress-relieving techniques is often the key to find relief from the increasingly common symptoms of menopause.