

MENOPAUSE TROUBLE

Think you can battle menopause all by yourself? Ladies, here's why you should see your doc for advice and, if necessary, treatment.

Compared to LOH, there's much greater awareness and acceptance of menopause as a medical condition. The Menopausal clinic at NUH sees about 15 to 30 patients daily.

Menopause occurs when a woman stops menstruating but the symptoms caused by declining levels of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone may start years before that. These include irregular periods, vaginal dryness and painful sex, hot flashes, insomnia, irritability, etc. According to Dr Dramusic Vesna, Senior Consultant at the NUH Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Asian women tend to experience fatigue and general body aches rather than hot flashes.

Estrogen also has the function of protecting the body from the loss of bone mass and from arteriosclerosis – the narrowing of the arteries, so the fall of its production leads to serious health issues for menopausal women. They are at risk of osteoporosis, the brittle bone disease, as well as high blood pressure and related heart and blood vessels diseases which rise sharply after menopause. Over 33 per cent of women are likely to die from the mentioned complications. For many women, it is hard to believe that only three to four per cent of post-menopausal women will die of breast cancer.

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"It is important to know that after menopause, women will lose one per cent of bone per year until the end of their lives," Dr Dramusic points out.

As life expectancy in Singapore increases, women will have to live with the problems of menopause for more years. Given that the current life expectancy for Singapore women is 82, and that the average age at which menopause occurs is 48.5, women here can expect to live for more than 30 years after menopause. "Thus, it is important to have a follow-up with a specialist for menopause," says Dr Dramusic.

There are a variety of treatments available and doctors can tailor treatments to the needs of each woman at various stages of menopause. "In view of the fact that we live so long, there is no medicine for a lifetime to solve menopausal problems, so we recommend a sequential type of treatment," says Dr Dramusic.

The most effective treatment is hormone replacement therapy (HRT) but some women shy away from it because of its highly-publicised link with breast cancer. Although there is a minor increased risk of breast cancer with HRT after five years of its use, this can be controlled by setting a time limit for its use.

"We consider that five years in general, is sufficient to alleviate all menopausal symptoms, maintain bones, and avert any increased risk of breast cancer," says Dr Dramusic. "Many women suffer unnecessarily from menopausal symptoms because of fear of increased risk of breast cancer due to HRT," she adds.

An alternative treatment to HRT is Livial, also known as Tibolone, the drug's generic name. In fact, it is advisable for patients to switch from HRT to Livial after five years. However some patients will go straight to treatment with Livial, as long as they are at least one year menopausal.

This is a tablet that can mimic various hormones – estrogen, progesterone and even the male hormone androgen – to alleviate the symptoms of menopause and keep bones in good shape, generate feelings of well-being and improved sexual life. Livial can be given up to the age of 65 and does not increase risk of breast cancer.

Not all women require treatment for menopause. While some suffer debilitating symptoms, others have it relatively easy and are able to cope without medical help. Even so, they should take extra care of their health after menopause. Besides exercising and maintaining a healthy weight, they should go for regular health screenings — pap smears to check for cervical cancer; mammograms, for breast cancer; and tests of their cholesterol levels to get an indication of their heart and blood vessels health.

To guard against osteoporosis, they should make sure their diets are rich in calcium. And as osteoporosis can creep up without showing any symptoms, periodic bone density scans can determine if treatment is needed to avert it. After 60 to 65 years of age, most women will stop all hormonal preparations, after which, we have a range of good medications catering only for bones. +

MALE VS FEMALE MENOPAUSE

Here's a quick look at their similarities and differences.

LATE-ONSET HYPOGONADISM (LOH)

* LOH is a biochemical syndrome associated with advancing age in men. It is caused by the lack of the male hormone, testosterone.

* Not all men are affected by it.

* Its symptoms include:

- ▶ Erectile dysfunction
- ▶ Loss of libido
- ▶ Sleep disturbances
- ▶ Mood swings, irritability and depression
- ▶ Decrease in intellectual activity and cognitive function
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Decrease in lean body mass
- ▶ Decrease in body hair
- ▶ Hot flushes, a sudden sensation of heat that rises from the chest to the face
- ▶ Decrease in bone mineral density, leading to osteoporosis

MENOPAUSE

* Menopause is the cessation of menstruation, caused by the body winding down production of the hormones estrogen and progesterone as the supply of eggs in the ovaries is depleted.

* It affects all women, usually around the ages of 45 to 55.

* The symptoms associated with menopause can start several years before periods end. They include:

- ▶ Irregular periods
- ▶ Vaginal dryness
- ▶ Loss of libido
- ▶ Hot flushes
- ▶ Pains and aches
- ▶ Fatigue
- ▶ Sleep disturbances
- ▶ Mood swings, irritability and depression
- ▶ Memory lapses and difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Decrease in bone mineral density, leading to osteoporosis as well as clogging of blood vessels due to lack of estrogen can go on for years without symptoms. Hence, we advise regular follow-ups with a doctor to decide if any treatment is required.