

# Herbal Supplements for Menopausal Women

## Menopause Changes

“Menopause” is defined as the absence of menstruation for 12 consecutive months. Normally, menopausal symptoms begin between 40 to 58 years. Early signs of menopause include irregular or prolonged menstrual bleeding that can become severe. As estrogen level declines, vasomotor symptoms (e.g. hot flushes, drenching night sweats) and non-vasomotor symptoms (e.g. insomnia, headaches, joint pain, vaginal dryness, tiredness, anxiety, irritability, mood swings, depression, loss of libido, difficulty with memory) may occur. The types of symptoms and their severity vary greatly among women.

## Management of Menopausal Symptoms

### **Hormonal treatment**

More women nowadays are turning to phytoestrogens (plant estrogens), and other natural products for menopausal symptoms.

Phytoestrogens are commonly used for vasomotor symptoms. The three main types are isoflavones, lignans, and coumestans, of which isoflavones are the most potent and the most common in supplements. Phytoestrogens are found in many common food sources, e.g. isoflavones can be found in legumes (soy, chickpeas, red clover, lentils, beans); lignans can be found in flaxseed, lentils, whole grains, beans, fruits, vegetables; coumestans can be found in red clover, sunflower seeds, sprouts.

**Soy** (*Glycine max*) and soy isoflavones are the most commonly used and the best studied phytoestrogens. Daily consumption of 20-60g of soy protein, equivalent to 34-76mg of isoflavones, seems to MODESTLY decrease the frequency and severity of hot flushes in menopausal women. Soy extracts providing 50mg of isoflavones daily, seems to have beneficial effects as well. Soy supplements appear to be helpful in about 30% of postmenopausal women.

Patients on warfarin should be cautious when taking soy supplements, as it can decrease the effectiveness of warfarin.

**Red clover** (*Trifolium pratense*) contains isoflavones similar to soy, but red clover is not as well studied as soy. There is some evidence that it might provide modest improvement in hot flushes for some women. But recent studies contradict these findings, and further evidence is required. Red clover may also have interaction with anticoagulants (eg. Warfarin).

**Flaxseed** (*Linum usitatissimum*) is a rich source of lignan phytoestrogens, omega-3 fatty acid, alpha-linolenic acid, and fiber. There are some suggestions that dietary flaxseed used in place of other dietary fats might be as effective as estrogen for mild menopausal symptoms. High doses of flaxseed can decrease platelet aggregation and could increase the risk of bleeding in patients who are taking warfarin.

**Panax ginseng** is sometimes used to relieve vasomotor symptoms. Whether ginseng has any estrogenic effect is controversial. Preliminary research suggests that it does not seem to help for hot flushes, but it might relieve other menopausal symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia and depression.

## Miscellaneous

Researchers used to think that **black cohosh** (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) is a phytoestrogen. But newer evidence suggests that it does not affect estrogen receptors. It is not clear how black cohosh works for menopausal symptoms. Despite the popularity of black cohosh, research supporting its use for hot flushes is not impressive. Black cohosh seems to be safe. However, recently the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) warned that black cohosh could be associated with liver damage. Women who wish to use black cohosh should consult their physician or pharmacist.

**Dong quai** (*Angelica sinensis*) is often used as a single-ingredient remedy for hot flushes in the West. There is contradictory evidence regarding whether or not dong quai has estrogenic effects. But dong quai does not seem to be effective for relieving hot flushes.

**Evening primrose oil** (*Oenothera biennis*) is sometimes promoted to relieve hot flushes, but there is no evidence of any effect on estrogen levels in humans, and it does not seem to be effective for relieving hot flushes.

**Vitamin E** supplements are sometimes recommended for menopausal symptoms. There is preliminary evidence that vitamin E might have a modest benefit but more evidence is required.

## Summary

**Soy** has the most evidence for effectiveness. **Black cohosh** has less evidence than soy, but might help some women.

More evidence is required before **red clover**, **flaxseed**, **evening primrose**, **Dong Guai**, **Panax ginseng**, or **vitamin E** can be recommended to relieve menopausal symptoms.

- Remember**
- i) **ALWAYS** take health supplements and alternative medicines with care.
  - ii) **ALWAYS** consult your health professionals before using any health or herbal supplements
  - iii) **Natural does not mean safe.** An overdose of health supplements may be harmful.

*The information in this leaflet is meant for educational purposes and should not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis or treatment. Please seek your doctor's advice before starting any treatment or if you have any questions related to your health, physical fitness or medical condition.*

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