



# Complementary and Alternative Approaches to Help You with Menopause Symptoms

**W**hether or not you decide to take hormone therapy, you can take steps to help lessen discomfort and improve your health during menopause. Although scientists are just beginning to document the benefits of mind-body and herbal approaches, there are some methods you can try to see if they help relieve your menopause symptoms and improve your sense of well-being.

## How can you relieve symptoms of menopause naturally?

### *Hot flashes*

- Keep track of what “triggers” your hot flashes. Some women’s hot flashes are related to strong emotions, caffeine, alcohol, spicy food, certain clothing, or heat. Once you know what your triggers are, try to avoid them.
- Sleep in a cool room. Use fans to improve air circulation.
- Practice deep breathing for 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the evening. Breathe slowly and deeply, bringing air into your lungs and belly.
- Drink cool beverages.
- Wear layers of cotton clothing.
- Some women find that foods containing soy (such as tofu, tempeh, soymilk, or soybeans) help with hot flashes.
- Talk to friends or find a support group.
- Take a stress management or mind-body class.

### *Menopausal sleeplessness*

- Keep your bedroom cool.
- Exercise daily for at least 30 minutes. You can exercise all at once or in three separate 10-minute sessions, but not within two hours of your bedtime.
- Wear light clothing made of natural fabrics.
- Avoid relying on sleeping pills.
- Don’t have caffeine or alcohol in the evenings.
- Take a warm bath or shower at bedtime.
- Drink warm milk.
- Attend an Insomnia or Sleep Better class at your local Kaiser Permanente facility.

### *Mood swings and anxiety*

- Use relaxation techniques, such as deep, slow breathing.
- Talk to friends or join a support group.
- Exercise daily for 30 minutes.
- Decrease the amount of caffeine and alcohol you drink.
- Find a creative activity you enjoy.
- Set aside 15 minutes every day just for worrying. Use this time to think about the things that cause your anxiety. Try not to think of your worries the rest of the day.

### *Important points to consider before using herbs and dietary supplements*

Women who are concerned about side effects or the increased risks for some medical conditions associated with hormone use may try herbs and dietary supplements for symptom relief. Please review the following important points before using herbs and dietary supplements:

- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate herbs and dietary supplements, so it’s hard to tell what you’re getting. The amounts of the active ingredients in similar herbal products may be different, or they may not even be present in some of these products.
- Herbs sometimes don’t work well together with other herbs, medications, and over-the-counter drugs. Make sure to talk to your physician, pharmacist, or other health care professional if you are taking medications and wish to start herbs, or vice versa.
- Please use caution when taking herbs and dietary supplements. Be aware that some of these products may contain contaminants that are introduced during production.



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### Herbs and dietary substances

#### *Soy products*

Soy has some positive effects on health. Soybeans and soy products contain a beneficial substance called isoflavone (also found in red clover) that has been shown to lower the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol. But research results about whether soy can decrease hot flashes are mixed. Some show a modest decrease only in women who take soy protein supplements—not isoflavones alone in pill form. Research does support eating a daily serving of soy (25 grams of soy protein) as part of a low-fat, well-balanced diet.

#### *Progestin cream*

Studies have shown that creams containing progestin may reduce hot flashes. Progestin creams should never be used in place of prescription progestin.

#### *Black cohosh*

Black cohosh is the most widely studied herb in menopause treatment. Some short, limited studies of a brand named *Remifemin* show that it may help relieve hot flashes, but other research does not support this. More importantly, there have been recent reports of serious liver problems developing in women taking black cohosh.

#### *Dong quai*

The first study on the use of dong quai for hot flashes was carried out at Kaiser Permanente. It showed that dong quai was no more helpful for hot flashes than a placebo (sugar pill). There are also concerns about the safety of dong quai. For these reasons, dong quai is not recommended.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.

#### *DHEA*

DHEA is a hormone that may change into male hormones when it enters the body. DHEA can cause acne, voice deepening, liver problems, and may decrease HDL (good) cholesterol. Women with high levels of DHEA seem to have more heart attacks. There is no evidence that DHEA is effective in improving health and the effects of long-term use is unknown. DHEA may be dangerous and is not recommended.

#### *Bioidentical or alternative estrogens*

The term “bioidentical” refers to hormones that are the same as hormones we have naturally in our bodies. They can be extracted from soy and yams and put into pills, patches, or creams. No studies prove that one hormone is safer than another. Concerns about the risks of breast cancer, stroke, and heart disease apply to all forms and types of hormones.

The hormones estradiol and progesterone are available in FDA-approved products (including estrogen pills and patches and progesterone capsules). These products have been tested for effectiveness, purity, and consistency and are on the Kaiser Permanente formulary. Prescription estrogens and progesterone can also be purchased from compounding pharmacies.

In addition to estradiol, there are compounds called “Tri-est” or “Bi-est” that combine different types of estrogen with emphasis on a weak estrogen called “estriol.” There are no studies in humans comparing the effects of these estrogens to the standard prescription estrogens. In addition, these estrogens are much more

expensive, are not FDA-controlled, and are no more “natural” than most of the prescription estrogens.

#### *Evening primrose oil*

There is no scientific evidence that evening primrose oil can reduce menopausal hot flashes.

#### *St. John’s wort*

Studies have shown that St. John’s wort may relieve symptoms of mild depression. St. John’s wort is not effective in treating major depression and is not usually recommended beyond two years. Side effects may include stomach upset, fatigue, and increased sensitivity to sunlight. This herb (also called hypericum) should not be used with anticlotting drugs or with prescription antidepressants.

### How to purchase herbs and supplements safely

Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herbs and supplements backed by research to show that they are effective in treating certain medical conditions.

#### Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org).