



Complementary and Alternative Approaches to Help You with Menopause Symptoms

There are many things you can do to lessen menopausal discomfort whether or not you decide to try hormone therapy. Scientists are just beginning to document the benefits of mind-body and herbal approaches. You can try some of them yourself to see if they help reduce your menopause symptoms and improve your sense of well-being.

How can you relieve symptoms of menopause naturally?

Hot flashes

- Keep track of things or events that trigger your hot flashes. Strong emotions, caffeine, alcohol, spicy food, certain clothing, or excessive heat can cause hot flashes in some women. Once you know what your triggers are, avoid them when possible.
- Practice deep breathing for 15 minutes in the morning and in the evening. Breathe slowly and deeply, bringing air into your lungs and belly.
- Drink cool beverages.
- Wear layers of cotton clothing or other natural fabrics.
- Try foods containing soy (such as tofu, tempeh, soy milk, or soybeans). Some women find that soy-based foods help with hot flashes.
- Take a stress management or mind-body class.
- Get your heart pumping. Women who exercise vigorously may have fewer hot flashes.

Menopausal sleeplessness

- Make sure your bedroom has good air circulation and keep it cool.
- Consider using only cotton for

your mattress pad and bed linens. Natural fabrics breathe better than synthetic.

- Exercise daily for at least 30 minutes. You can exercise for 30 minutes all at once or in three separate 10 minute sessions, but not within two hours of your bedtime.
- Avoid relying on sleeping pills.
- Do not have caffeine or alcohol in the evenings.
- Take a warm bath or shower at bedtime.
- Drink warm milk or chamomile tea before bedtime.
- Attend an insomnia class at your local Kaiser Permanente facility.
- Take Overcoming™ Insomnia, an online Healthy Lifestyle Program on kp.org.

Mood swings and anxiety

- Use relaxation techniques, like deep, slow breathing.
- Talk to friends or join a support group or class at your Kaiser Permanente facility.
- 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 for the rest of the day. Sometimes writing down what's on your mind can lessen your worries.

Important points to consider before using herbs and supplements:

Many women are concerned about the side effects and increased risks for certain medical conditions that come with hormone use. If you share these concerns, you may want to try herbs and dietary supplements for menopause 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 differ, or the ingredient may not even be present. New products that claim to be "clinically proven" to work appear almost daily. The studies to back this claim may be funded by those with financial interest in the product and may not have adhered to the high standards required by the FDA for FDA approved products. This does not mean that these products don't work. There just isn't enough information to say whether the product is effective or safe.
- Some herbs don't work well when used with other herbs, medications, and over-the-counter drugs. Make sure to talk to your physician or pharmacist 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 from the production process.



Complementary and Alternative Approaches to Help You with Menopause Symptoms

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 into whether soy can decrease hot flashes has resulted in mixed findings. Some studies show a small decrease in women who take soy protein supplements but not in women who take isoflavones alone in a pill. 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 the brand 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 in women taking black cohosh. For this reason, we do not recommend that anyone take this supplement at this time. Beware of products containing this herb as an ingredient.

Dong quai

The first study on the use of dong quai for hot flashes was carried out at Kaiser Permanente. The study showed that dong quai was no more helpful for hot flashes than a placebo (sugar pill). We do not recommend this supplement.

DHEA

DHEA is a hormone that changes into estrogen and testosterone 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 well-being or health, and the long-term effects are unknown. We do not recommend this supplement.

Bioidentical/Natural hormones

The term bioidentical refers to hormones that are chemically identical to those we make naturally in our bodies. These hormones are made from materials found in soy and yams and go through a complicated process to end up as pills, patches, creams, and sprays.

No studies so far have proven that one type of hormone is more safe or effective than another type. Concerns regarding the risk of breast cancer, stroke, and heart disease apply to all forms and types of hormones, even those labeled natural.

Kaiser Permanente’s list of approved medications include FDA approved estrogen pills, estrogen patches, and progesterone capsules. These products are made from plant materials and have been tested for effectiveness, purity, and consistency. In general, FDA approved products are safer than supplements that are not regulated and approved by the FDA.

Non-FDA approved prescription estrogens and progesterone can be purchased from compounding pharmacies. Compounding pharmacies are private pharmacies that take the same estradiol and progesterone made from the same plant sources as the FDA approved medications and mix them into creams, gels and capsules. These pharmacies also sell products that contain a weak estrogen called estriol and may contain another estrogen called estrone.

There are no reliable studies in humans

that have compared the effects of these compounds to the standard prescription hormones. Since these products are no more natural or bioidentical than prescription hormones, we recommend FDA approved hormone therapy medications when a woman decides to use hormone therapy.

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 which may accompany menopause. However, it is not effective in treating major depression and usually is not recommended beyond two years. Side effects may include stomach upset, fatigue, and increased sensitivity to sunlight. It 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 for which some evidence exists to show that they may be effective in treating certain medical conditions.

Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- menopause.org
- Request a copy of *Menopause: A Kaiser Permanente Guidebook for Women* from your physician or other medical professional.

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.