

## **The heat of the moment**

Why is it that for some women the menopause is such a nightmare and for others it's a breeze? This question has been around for a very long time and for men, this episode in a woman's life is incomprehensible.

I divide the range of symptoms that accompany the menopause into 3. The first being the hot flushes and sweats, both day and night, that seem to well up from the very soul. Secondly, there is the emotional rollercoaster: the depression, fatigue, anxiety, mood swings, panic attacks, insomnia, dizziness, palpitations, numbness in limbs, headaches. Thirdly, all the above plus loss of libido and pain in intimacy.

So what is the menopause? The word means the pause of menstruation. The very word pause indicates ceasing an action temporarily. It's a very uncertain time because pregnancy can still occur. In reality the menopause is over when it's been about 8 years from the start of symptoms. It's the third and final stage of a woman's reproductive cycle: a totally normal occurrence that is replicated in most species. Women used to look forward to this time when their child bearing years would come to an end, but in our society it is dreaded, largely thanks to the symptoms I've described.

The ovaries are the main source of oestrogen production: oestriol, oestrone and oestradiol, and progesterone, so when the production of eggs starts to decline, so does the production of these hormones. The start of the decline is known as perimenopause. The symptoms fluctuate and progress in strength. As less oestrogen is being synthesised, the ovaries try to stimulate further oestrogen production, but when very low levels of oestrogen feed back to the Pituitary (part of the brain that controls this), more hormones are released in an attempt to stimulate the ovaries to produce even more oestrogen. When this does not happen, a cascade of neuron activity kicks in, causing dilation of peripheral blood vessels (vasodilation). This causes more blood to flow through, creating the sweats and hot flushes. The whole process is controlled by the Endocrine System which controls all hormones and their activities. It is the internal mechanism of hormones that causes hot flushes and sweats, and no amount of open windows or fans will stop this.

So what can be done about this? Once the simplicity of the problem is exposed, the remedy can be sought. There is much scientific evidence that supports dietary intervention being extremely helpful. By incorporating phytoestrogens (aka isoflavones – phyto means plant) into the diet, oestrogen demand is reduced and the cascade of neuron activity is diminished. Phytoestrogens have a similar chemical structure to human oestrogen, and they mimic oestrogen's role in the body so are able to compete successfully for the oestrogen cell receptor sites. They can be found in many foods, such as flax seeds, legumes, lentils, chickpeas, yellow and red coloured fruit (including citrus fruit) and vegetables. Phytoestrogens have been extensively studied and over 1000 have been identified in plants. Those found in red clover are Biochanin, Formononetin, Genistein and Diadzein which have been shown to possess significant oestrogenic activity. Others are Black Cohosh, Dong Quai and Licorice Root.

Lifestyle factors can also contribute to vasodilation such as hot baths or showers and excessive exercise. Caffeine containing foods also contribute to symptoms: chocolates, spicy foods, alcohol, tea and coffee. The natural way is a safe and healthy solution for the whole body. So, could these women who sail easily through the menopause be eating a more phytoestrogen rich diet? Thankfully clinical evidence supports this. Why play Russian Roulette with HRT when mother nature has already provided the answer?

**Maria Griffiths is a Nutritional Therapist with 20 years' experience and is registered with the Complementary & Natural Healthcare Council, which meets national standards. She is a Senior Associate Member of The Royal Society of Medicine.**