

Ayurvedic Support for Menopause

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With the boomer generation heading into their late fifties and sixties, there are more menopausal and post-menopausal women around than ever before in human history. Our understanding of this important phenomenon and of how to support women in all stages of menopause is thus an essential aspect of Ayurveda practice today. Yet menopause is a more difficult topic to approach than, for example, uterine cancer, because menopause is not an illness. Any woman, however healthy, will go through menopause sometime in her mid-forties to mid-fifties. This seemingly obvious point is key, if only because in allopathic medicine today, menopause is seen as a deficiency disease and is typically treated with “hormone replacement therapy,” a phraseology indicating the pathologizing of this natural process.

Within Ayurveda there are two fundamental traditions which I like to call the Father lineage and the Mother lineage. The Father lineage, contained in the sutras and in the traditions of vaidya families, contains a wealth both of theoretical and philosophical teachings as well as specific approaches to every known pathology. The Mother lineage, held for generations by the grandmothers of the Indian subcontinent, includes recipes and home remedies that particularly address the support of natural processes such as pregnancy, birth and menopause. Both lineages are of great value in menopausal support, depending whether actual pathology has entered into the process or not. For a healthy menopause, home remedies such as cumin-coriander-fennel tea are of great value, while proper chikitsa must be applied where doshic imbalances are affecting the progress of menopause.

What is a healthy menopause?

In an ideally healthy menopause process, a woman of the age of forty five or over will begin skipping menstrual periods. She may notice some hot flashes or night sweats, particularly if she is Pitta. Gradually her flow will become lighter, number of days of menstrual bleeding will diminish, menstrual periods will space out and eventually will cease. Once a woman has not experienced menstrual bleeding for a full year, she is said to have attained menopause. Although this picture of the menopause process is one of health rather than disease, we should still note that menopause is termed in common speech “the Change.” In other words, for even the healthiest woman, it is a Vata process. Indeed, the menopause process announces the transition between the Pitta and Vata time of life. Typical Vata symptoms include vagina dryness, indecisiveness, insomnia and a sudden onset of age-related mental decline—the famous “senior moment.”

Supporting a Healthy Menopause

Support of a healthy menopause includes gentle rejuvenation of *artava dhatu*, the female reproductive system, as well as lifestyle measures for Vata management. Vata can be managed by self-massage using the indicated oil for the woman’s constitution—Vata, Pitta or Kapha Massage Oil. A weekly bath using dry ginger powder and baking soda will also help calm vata. Cumin-coriander-fennel tea contains natural phyto-estrogens that support healthy hormonal balance, while tea made from organic Tulsi will relieve the tendency to ‘senior moments,’ stress and indecisiveness. A gentle Vata soothing yoga practice is also of help. A woman going through

menopause should be advised to shift her diet to focus on foods that provide positive nourishment. In general, there are three kinds of food we can put in our bodies, those that are good for us, those that are not harmful but not positively good and those that are bad for us. A menopausal or post-menopausal woman can be counseled to focus on high quality nutrition, emphasizing foods and teas that are positively beneficial. Perhaps the greatest support of all can be derived from women circling together to support and understand their body's process of change. Since ancient times, New Moon has been an occasion for women to gather to honor the cycles and seasons of their bodies. A women's menopause support group, accompanied by Ayurvedic teas and sesame snacks laced with Shatavari, would be a wonderful addition to any Ayurveda practice.

Menopause with Vata Imbalance

Looking back on my own menopause, I can recall bursting into tears in Wild Oats Market because I was unable to make a decision on what food to purchase for my cat! Adrenal stress is a typical feature of Vata-imbalanced menopause. A woman whose menopause is affected by Vata imbalance may also experience earlier onset of menopause (before age forty-five), clinically significant insomnia, impaired short term memory and emotional lability as well as osteoporosis or osteopenia.

Supporting menopause with Vata imbalance

For adrenal stress, impaired short term memory and indecisiveness, a tea made from equal parts Tulsi and Brahmi can be very beneficial. For insomnia, a teaspoon of Ashwagandha in a cup of warm milk at bed time will help ensure sound sleep. The soles of the feet can be massaged with Brahmi oil at bed time. Daily self massage using Vata Massage Oil is essential, while regular *basti* using Dashamoola tea will also help alleviate Vata symptoms. Diet should be moist, well-cooked and regular. For Osteoporosis or osteopenia, a teaspoon of Arjuna in a cup of warm milk twice a day in the morning and evening can help restore normal bone density.

Menopause with Pitta imbalance

Pitta-imbalanced menopause can manifest with a range of symptoms from annoying to serious or even life-threatening. The most common symptom is hot flashes and or night sweats. Although hot flashes are not dangerous in any way, at their height they can be quite disruptive. My mother describes with horror an unforgettable hot flash when driving which was so severe that she had to pull over on the hard shoulder. Night sweats can disrupt sleep, leading to fatigue and impaired functioning. Next most common is a typical Pitta peri-menopause pattern, where menstrual periods become more frequent, often spacing to as little as twenty one days apart. This oestrogen-dominant pattern has an inherent danger in that it leads to more periods and hence to a greater opportunity of developing uterine cancer. It can also lead to iron deficiency anaemia as the body does not have a chance to make up its iron reserves before bleeding occurs again. Many Pitta women also suffer from an apparent personality change into "Amazon Woman." As levels of progesterone and then oestrogen drop, the relative level of testosterone becomes greater. Hence a Pitta-provoked menopausal woman may experience levels of anger, aggression and fighting spirit that are quite unfamiliar to both her and her partner. At worst, a Pitta imbalanced menopause may destroy a hitherto satisfying life partnership, although at best it can lead to a healthy integration of a woman's more assertive masculine aspect. Menorrhagia and uterine haemorrhage are the most

life-threatening aspects of a Pitta-imbalanced menopause, leading to iron deficiency anaemia, protein deficiency and fatigue, as well as possibly a hospitalization and transfusion.

Supporting Menopause with Pitta Imbalance

As soon as a Pitta woman notices indications of the onset of menopausal changes, she would be well advised to start using Shatavari Kalpa. Roast an ounce of Shatavari with one or two tablespoons ghee in a cast iron pan until light brown and add two tablespoons of sucanat, rapadura or turbinado sugar, two pinches saffron and a pinch of cardamom, and eat a teaspoon three times daily. A Pitta soothing diet is essential at this stage, especially avoiding acidic foods such as eggplant and tomato sauce, as well as hot spices. These measures will help with regulation of the menstrual cycle to a more normal length and will ease hot flashes and night sweats. Pitta soothing yoga such as forward bends, shoulder stand and shavasana will also be supportive. For anger and irritability Brahmi tea can be taken three times daily, one teaspoon per cup. It can also be tremendously helpful for a woman in pitta-imbalanced menopause to have her own room to sleep in, especially if her moods are putting a stress on her life-partnership. During Pitta menopause she may well be up during the pitta time of night, both because of hot flashes and because of flashes of inspiration that lead her to journal, draw and write poetry. It is helpful to have the space to follow her own altered rhythms at this time. For excess menstrual bleeding, a good home remedy is Hibiscus tea with a little Cinnamon. It is also essential to give supplemental iron in menorrhagia, since low serum iron causes the blood vessels in the uterus to lose their capacity to constrict, further increasing menstrual bleeding. One method for supplementing iron is to make a paste from half a teaspoon of Triphala and to place it overnight in a cast iron vessel, where it will absorb the iron. Triphala in turn will support iron absorption in the gastro-intestinal tract.

Menopause with Kapha imbalance

Although most women gain about ten pounds during the menopause process, Kapha imbalanced women may gain significant amounts of weight, becoming overweight or obese. Their thyroid function may be affected by the hormonal changes of menopause, resulting in lowered metabolism and an inability to lose weight. Fibrocystic changes may occur in the breasts during perimenopause, while fluid retention may also be an issue.

Supporting Menopause with Kapha Imbalance

Nutritional counseling is essential for any kapha woman over forty, for weight once gained will be hard to remove. Most essential is avoidance of starchy foods during the Kapha time of the evening, with dinner consisting of soup, vegetables or salad. To make this work, a good lunch is needed, although even at lunch, kapha must understand that a portion of rice or other starchy foods is half a cup. Refined sugars should also be avoided, and a kapha soothing diet implemented. Exercise is essential and is particularly useful during the kapha time of morning—a good time for yoga, as well as the kapha time of night, when a brisk walk is in order.

Menopause is a time of death and rebirth. The childbearing years are over and the season of elderhood is on its way. Women in the menopause process need the opportunity to mourn their lost youth and fertility, a process that is particularly painful for a woman who has not had children or has lost pregnancies. Brahmi tea may be of great support in the grieving process that

accompanies this death and rebirth. Ritual is also of great help. Although it may seem embarrassing to some have a “menopause party,” a fiftieth birthday celebration can be turned into a ritual honoring the transition from the mother to grandmother stage of life. Even age-related mental decline may not be what it at first appears to be. One kind of functioning diminishes to make way for another, more reflective and intuitive way. Women elders may not be as quick as when they were younger, yet great wisdom can be harvested from elder mind. Our thinking becomes less linear and more holistic and systems oriented. A good practitioner will help women not only mourn what they are losing but also celebrate what they are embracing. Menopause is a natural process and it is so for the good of the whole, because women elders and their unique wisdom are needed to guide the human community.

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All herbs mentioned in this article are available from Namaskar Healing.