

What You Should Know About Herbal Therapies for Menopause

Natural menopause is a normal part of getting older. Even though some of the symptoms of menopause can be uncomfortable, menopause should not be considered an illness.

Most of the uncomfortable feelings during menopause are known medically as vasomotor symptoms. Common examples are hot flashes, mood swings, and night sweats. Vasomotor symptoms can be mild, moderate, or severe. Many women with vasomotor symptoms want medication to help ease the discomfort. Some women take hormone therapy. Others don't need any medication, while some decide to seek "alternative" treatments like herbs or plant-based products.

ARE HERBAL THERAPIES SAFE?

Although many herbal therapies (herbals) are considered to be "natural," they may create side effects and drug interactions in the body, just like other over-the-counter or prescription drugs. However, herbals are not controlled by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), meaning there may be safety or dosage issues that have not been checked or monitored. Herbals might have unlabeled ingredients, different amounts of ingredients than stated on the label, or even none of the ingredients listed on the label. For these reasons, it is important to tell your health care provider if you are taking herbals and which types and brands you are taking.

So far, very few large studies have been done on long-term safety and benefits of most herbals.

WHO SHOULD NOT TAKE HERBALS

When taken for a long time, some herbs can affect the liver. If you have liver problems, or take

drugs that already affect your liver, these herbals are not right for you.

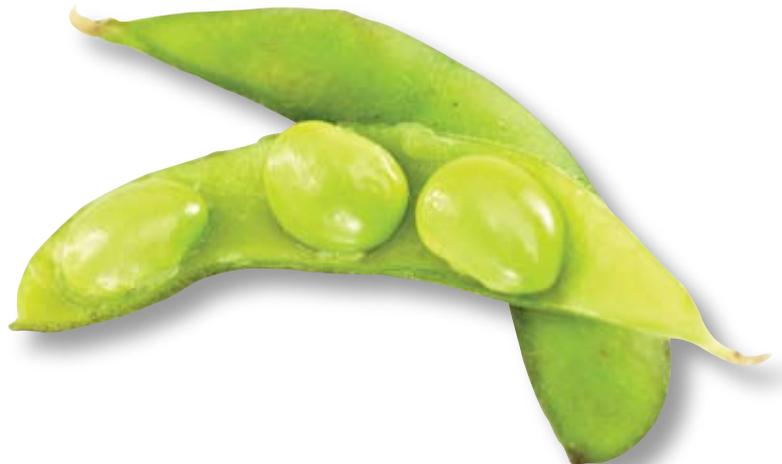
Phytoestrogen, a natural version of estrogen found in many herbals, affects hormone-sensitive parts of your body (like your uterus and breasts). Some women with certain types of breast cancer or uterine conditions should not take herbals with phytoestrogen.

It is important to tell your health care provider if you are taking herbals.

TYPES OF HERBALS

Some common herbal and plant-based herbal therapies include soy, black cohosh, red clover, ginseng, and kava.

Soy. Some studies show that soy foods can help with mild hot flashes. However, soy is a phytoestrogen, which could have effects on the breasts or uterus.



Herbal Therapies for Menopause

Black cohosh. Taking black cohosh may reduce the frequency of hot flashes and mood swings. In high doses, however, it can cause nausea, vomiting, headaches, or dizziness. Women with liver problems (like hepatitis) or those taking drugs that affect the liver should not use this herb. Black cohosh is also a phytoestrogen, but there is much debate about how it actually helps relieve vasomotor symptoms.

Red clover. Another phytoestrogen, red clover may help reduce hot flashes. Like all phytoestrogens, it may not be good for women with certain types of breast cancer or uterine conditions.

Remember, menopause is a natural part of getting older.

Ginseng. Ginseng may improve mood-swings and sleep. It does not help hot flashes.

Kava. Like ginseng, kava may improve mood, but does not reduce hot flashes. Kava has been related to liver damage, so if you have liver problems, this supplement may not be right for you.

DHEA. Not plant-based, dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) is a natural substance sold as a supplement. The body changes it into estrogen and testosterone. It may help with hot flashes and decreased sexual arousal. The natural DHEA already found in the body lessens with age, so taking a DHEA supplement might help vasomotor symptoms. There are not enough studies on DHEA supplement side effects, so talk to your health care provider about risks.

OTHER OPTIONS

Remember, menopause is a natural part of getting older. Before you decide to take any herbal treatments or hormones, make sure you are doing all you can to be healthy. Stop smoking, eat right, and exercise. Doing so may help your vasomotor symptoms. You can also wear lighter clothing or clothing in layers to decrease hot flashes.

If you decide to take herbals or other supplements, check with your health care provider to make sure they are right for you. There is not a lot of proof that many supplements work. There is also a risk in taking supplements that are not regulated by the FDA. By talking to your health care provider, you can figure out if certain treatments are worth trying. You can also get a better idea of what to expect when you go through menopause and how to handle the change.

RESOURCES

**National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
National Institutes of Health**
www.nccam.nih.gov

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

- Herbal Products for Menopause
www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp158.cfm
- The Menopause Years
www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp047.cfm

**The National Women's Health Information Center
US Department of Health and Human Services
Office on Women's Health**
Menopause and Menopause Treatments
www.womenshealth.gov/faq/Menopause.pdf