

Hot Flashes and Sleep Challenges...Dealing with “The Change”

By Cynthia Calmenson

If you are approaching fifty or are on your way to sixty you have probably experienced one or more of the following: hot flashes, insomnia, mood swings, headaches, irregular menstruation, fatigue, vaginal dryness, vaginal discomfort during intercourse, mild to moderate incontinence, weight gain, and low libido. These are “perimenopause” symptoms, the phase during which you stop menstruating regularly. Once you have stopped for a year, you are considered in “menopause”, or the official end of menstruation. Doesn’t sound like much fun does it? Well, maybe except for ceasing to menstruate.

While transitioning into this phase can be easy for some women, for many it is a stressful and often unwelcome shift in their physical and emotional lives. The information available to us now is so much better than what our mother’s were told, but it can still be confusing and expensive. Just take a walk down the supplements aisle of your local health food store. Many products claim to alleviate one or more of these symptoms but are often not the right formulation or dosage specific to *your* needs. You can spend quite a bit of money trying out what the clerk suggests without really knowing if it will help. Furthermore, some of the symptoms mentioned above are more related to changes in thyroid function, adrenal gland depletion (stress anyone??), or pituitary imbalance. So now what?

Here are steps you can take that will support this phase of your “body life” with intelligence and greater ease. Check your sleep hygiene! Lights out by ten p.m., no caffeine before bed (step away from the chocolate!), no TV to fall asleep by, and the room as dark as possible. Use blackout curtains and cover over anything emitting green, red, or white light (clock radios, alarm clocks, laptop computers, etc.). If you need a nightlight, use one with a blue bulb for the lowest light possible.

Feeling like a couch potato but don’t have the motivation to go to the gym? Even a slight increase in your physical activity can help regulate and balance your hormonal fluctuations. Choose a friend and make time in your day for a brisk walk around your ‘hood. This small change plus lowering your caffeine intake will also help with reducing the severity and frequency of hot flashes.

Of course, consult a qualified healthcare provider (MD, ND, L.Ac., FNP) about the symptoms that are most troubling to you and ask her or him to help you develop an approach that works for *you*. While you’re at it, ask your doctor to check your Vitamin D levels and your thyroid function. These are simple, standard, and inexpensive blood tests that will help guide your approach.

This combination of self-care and the support of a trusted medical source will make your “change” easier and less stressful.

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