



## **NATURAL MENOPAUSE FOR WOMEN**

By Kalpana (Rose) M. Kumar, MD

In the decades I have worked with women in midlife, I have come to a much deeper understanding of the sacred process of women's cycles, and the powerful transition women make in their forties and fifties that has the potential to deeply heal unhealed aspects of their bodies and their lives.

Carl Jung said that the window between the unconscious and conscious is thin during adolescence and in midlife. We get a second chance in midlife to reinvent ourselves from the inside out. The process is transformational and with precise guidance from those who have traversed this sacred territory one can orient themselves at all levels of body, mind, and Soul as one explores who they truly are and what they are here to contribute.

Since Christiane Northrup, MD, published her landmark book entitled, *The Wisdom of Menopause*, a much deeper understanding of women's health has emerged. Although it has not yet made its way into the traditional medical system, which continues to pathologize women's bodies and processes, a stirring and an awakening has begun in unprecedented numbers of women. In my practice I see multitudes of women who have a keen insight into their process and an understanding of where their healing is needed.

As recently as a decade ago, women would come to my practice asking me for advice, and relied on my knowledge and wisdom about their process. I find myself now offering them a framework with which they can journey through the changes in their mind, body, and soul, as well as provide validation and understanding for the process they bring with them to help integrate balance at physiological and emotional levels through integrative medicine.

Times have changed and there is a deeper longing for a healthy framework to replace the victim/persecutor/rescuer framework that women have been imprinted to live out by our society. Moreover, traditional medical practice promotes fear and dependency which disempowers women. They are asking for a more empowering form of health care in which they can work collaboratively with their health care practitioner to understand and identify the areas of imbalance in their life that may be causing their conditions.

Women's health has been one of the least understood and most neglected areas of medicine.

In a woman's late thirties, her hormones begin to shift subtly. In our American society, the synthetic estrogen load from the estrogen in meat and dairy, oral contraceptives, by-products of plastics and pesticides, in excess body fat stores, as well as higher concentrations of synthetic estrogen in the groundwater (from the hormones animals and women excrete due to higher intake of synthetic hormones) creates a state of estrogen dominance in a woman's body. In order to have a healthy cycle and a healthy peri-menopausal transition, progesterone needs to be balanced with estrogen. At this age, progesterone levels begin to drop gently, stimulating stress hormones that are produced with this imbalance. She begins to experience the imbalance around two weeks before her menses and it becomes more exaggerated right before menses. She feels more irritable, experiences early morning awakening as well as restless sleep, hair thinning, emotional extremes and sensitivity, heavier periods, skin changes including more acne, increased abdominal girth, breast tenderness, memory changes, bowel sensitivity or irritable bowel symptoms and sensitivity to various foods particularly dairy and gluten. She simultaneously finds her Soul becoming restless and begins asking a series of questions about her life and her relationships from a deeper newer level. She begins to want more Truth in her life and finds herself intolerant of anything less. She also begins to ask questions like 'why am I here?' She finds herself being awoken by this question in the middle of the night with relentless fervor.

I have seen diabetic women develop difficulty with blood sugar control prior to their periods, as well as women with ulcerative colitis and lupus experiencing a worsening of their symptoms before their periods. These have been correlated with lower blood progesterone levels and improve with natural progesterone.

When I received my training in internal medicine at Stanford University in the late 1980's, women's health was a novel subject with little passion or interest from the medical community. The answer to most issues that women came in with was addressed with oral contraceptives, hormone replacement therapy, antidepressants or hysterectomies. Women would leave the Medical Center feeling disempowered and broken. Not much has changed in the medical field of women's health since the eighties. This form of medicine did not resonate with me at all. It felt disempowering and women felt broken and betrayed by their bodies. It certainly did not educate them or address their issues. As a woman myself, I felt deeply betrayed by the medical system on behalf of my gender with the pathology oriented framework that diagnosed the natural transition of menopause as an estrogen deficiency and premenstrual syndrome as a psychiatric condition.

When I first began hearing about natural hormones, I intuitively felt that they had promise. As a clinician and a scientist, I waited patiently for research that could demonstrate credibility and legitimacy for standard-of-practice so I could safely prescribe natural hormones. In the last twenty years, no large scale studies have been done. This is mostly due to the fact that the pharmaceutical industry and the research industry do not see any legitimacy in conducting studies on what are not synthetic pharmaceuticals. Despite that, I began seeing women who came to me on natural hormones themselves and were experiencing great results. Their symptoms of the hormone imbalance and estrogen dominance were dissipating. As I approached my late thirties, and began experiencing the estrogen dominance symptoms, I tried natural progesterone, and within one cycle of taking it, felt significantly more balanced with more vitality and energy. I began prescribing the natural hormones, but felt it was important to objectify the treatment with blood levels of hormones, including a thyroid panel which is also imbalanced during this transition process in over 25% of American women. The results were unprecedented and mostly (90% of the time) positive when combined with lifestyle change that introduced healthy nutrition and exercise into the therapeutic process. I also read most of what was published on natural hormones to be able to understand the mechanisms, risks and benefits of them in order to help my patients take them safely.

Although estrogen replacement has been touted by the traditional medical model as the key 'woman's hormone', in my experience with thousands of women over twenty years, I have experienced more positive effects of natural progesterone on symptoms of chronic illness including fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, as well as mild anxiety and depression. In many cases, fibromyalgia patients who developed their symptoms during their menopausal transition were symptom free after beginning the correct therapeutic dose of natural progesterone.

Progesterone has a profound effect on reducing tendon and muscle injury in active women, restores the sleep cycle, lifts mild depression, improves cognition and the mild short term memory loss that occurs in most women in perimenopause and restores a sense of balance in the majority of women who use it for symptomatic relief of perimenopausal symptoms. In addition, it has a profound effect on building bone density. Estrogen only reduces the breakdown of bone density, and not significantly. The same results do not occur with synthetic progesterone. As women seek balance for their midlife process it's important to keep sight of the deeper levels of balance that are needed to restore health and equanimity.

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