



Managing menopause

Spas now offer effective tools to ease this often difficult life transition • By Sarah Mahoney

A GOOD SPA EXPERIENCE CAN BE ONE OF THE best ways to decrease hormonal symptoms,” says Christiane Northrup, M.D., the author of *The Wisdom of Menopause* and a frequent speaker at the Sanoviv Medical Institute in Mexico, one of North America’s leading establishments in combining high-tech diagnosis with complementary medicine. Northrup’s assertion reflects the growing appreciation of the role day-to-day stress plays in aggravating the symptoms of menopause. That’s

a major reason spas are creating a role for themselves in helping women negotiate this stage of life.

The main cause of menopause is the decline in estrogen that besets women at an average age of 51. The symptoms are well-known: hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, vanishing libido, weight gain, and loss of energy. The treatments at spas reflect the three main schools of thought about ameliorating these symptoms. On one end of the spectrum are advocates of natural or bio-identical hormones, popularized by actress Suzanne Somers’s book,

The Sexy Years: Discover the Hormone Connection. Although bio-identical hormones haven’t been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the treatment is legal and many doctors and medical spas administer it. At the opposite end are Ayurvedic practitioners, who believe hormonal changes should be balanced, not suppressed, and without drugs. In the middle are spas that combine spa treatments with Western medicine, which considers the severity of symptoms and personal health history against the risks and benefits of FDA-approved drugs.

HOWEVER, THERE’S NO ONE-SIZE-FITS ALL solution, say experts. “The biggest myth about menopause is that we can make any kind of generalization about it,” says Marcie Richardson, M.D., a gynecologist who is an instructor at Harvard Medical School and codirector of the menopause consultation service at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates. “There’s no silver bullet.”

While there may not be a universal solution, Northrup thinks there is a universal villain: stress. “Not only are most of the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause stress-related, but about 90 percent of them can be helped by making lifestyle changes,” she says. “Because of the debates about the safety of hormones, it’s easy to get all caught up in thinking you need an arsenal of pharmaceuticals to get through these changes—and you don’t.” In fact, the North American Menopause Society (NAMS) says that when it comes to riding out hormonal shifts, the right mentality may be your most important asset. “Negative beliefs held prior to menopause can be predictive of a more difficult time,” reports NAMS, meaning they can worsen symptoms like hot flashes. And “changing those negative thoughts and attitudes can result in a reduction of symptoms.”

To find out about the variety and validity of spa menopause programs, I get on the phone and get on a plane. I’m 47, which means I’m perimenopausal, the medical term used to describe the five or so years of hormonal change preceding menopause. So far, my symptoms are minor and textbook—creeping weight gain, the odd bout of insomnia, and one very intense hot flash.

I start by calling Daniel Cosgrove, M.D., the medical director of the WellMax Center for Preventive Medicine at La Quinta Resort and Club near Palm Springs, California. Cosgrove is an exponent of the bio-identical path but says it has to be woven into the entire medical-evaluation process. “We approach menopause in several ways all at once,” he says. “We want to know what symp-

Spas for Menopause Management

1. The seven-day Journey: A Woman’s Retreat at Canyon Ranch in Tucson combines Eastern and Western approaches. US\$5,750–\$8,210, 800-742-9000, www.canyonranch.com

2. The Medical and Skin Spa at the Agua Serena Spa at the Hyatt Grand Champions Resort in California is run by Richard M. Foxx, M.D., a member of the North American Menopause Society, who favors bio-identical hormone therapy. One-hour consultations for patients only, US\$400, not including tests. 760-674-4106, www.medicalandskinspa.com

3. Pratima Ayurvedic Skin Care, a New York City day spa, offers menopause consultations and treatment. Initial consultation: US\$125. Follow-up visit: US\$75, 212-581-8136, www.pratimaskincare.com

4. The Raj in Iowa offers tailored Ayurvedic programs of five days or more. From US\$3,422, 800-248-9050, www.theraj.com

5. The WellMax Center for Preventive Medicine at La Quinta Resort and Club in California offers personalized two- and three-day complete physicals that include consultations with Daniel Cosgrove, M.D., and bio-identical hormone treatments. Membership is required (US\$3,000 per year). US\$7,250–\$11,250, 800-621-5263, www.wellmax.com



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JO TRONG

Best Stress-Reducing Spa Services



Acupuncture

A number of studies have shown that it can decrease the severity of hot flashes, which affect about 75 percent of women. One done by the Stanford University School of Medicine found that seven weeks of treatments reduced symptoms by 28 percent. How? “The body’s yin energy, which is abundant in younger women, declines as they age,” says Noah Rubinstein, an acupuncturist at Longevity + Health in New York City (212-675-9355, www.longevityhealth.org). “Yin and yang balance each other, with the depletion of that cooling yin, the yang energy becomes more pronounced—night sweats, hot flashes, and heart palpitations—which we can help rebalance with acupuncture.” A single treatment can help, but most people require multiple sessions, so look for a spa close to home.



Yoga

The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) recommends a technique called paced respiration to control hot flashes. The breathing practice is taught in many yoga disciplines, particularly kundalini. Rancho la Puerta in Mexico (800-443-7565, www.rancholapuerta.com) and the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Massachusetts (866-200-5203, www.kripalu.org) are known for their yoga programs.



Regular Exercise

Although technically not a spa service, challenging exercise may be as effective as hormone therapy in reducing symptoms, reports NAMS. (Bonus: It also slows bone loss, boosts mental health, and wards off metabolic changes.) While many spas offer personal training, look for those with lots of fitness options and exercise physiologists who can help design weight-training programs. Two that get high marks are the Golden Door (800-424-0777, www.goldendoor.com) and Cal-a-Vie (866-772-4283, www.calavie.com), both in California.

toms are present, from hot flashes and night sweats to vaginal dryness, and how severe they are. And we measure bone density, as well as key hormones” and, if necessary, prescribe what Cosgrove calls natural hormones, bio-identical hormones derived from plant or synthetic sources. These have grown in popularity since conventional hormones—some of which are also called equine hormones because they’re created from the urine of

pregnant mares—have come under fire. (See “Hormone Replacement: Tough Decision,” opposite.)

Cosgrove finds that these hormones, when used properly, can make an enormous difference in a woman’s life. “If my patient’s body’s own receptors (and those of her grandmother’s grandmother) know human estrogen and I can duplicate the hormone and its delivery, this seems intuitively more prudent than providing orally

delivered equine estrogens and totally synthetic Provera,” he says.

But just focusing on drugs is a big mistake, says Cosgrove. He also talks to patients about symptoms such as mood swings in order to distinguish biological problems from the psychological issues that typically crowd midlife. “It’s too easy for some doctors to solve a woman’s stress at the time of menopause with a quick prescription,” he says. “It’s important to look at all kinds of stress—including the challenge of confronting a milestone as major as menopause. Our doctors have found that there’s an overall midlife stress independent of job, husbands, empty-nest syndrome, and hormones. There are fears of getting older and for many women a sense of being lost, of needing to reinvent their lives.”

Richard M. Foxx, M.D., who oversees the Medical and Skin Spa at the Agua Serena Spa at the Hyatt Grand Champions Resort in Indian Wells, California, is also a big believer in stress management, as well as bio-identical hormones. His prescriptions are precisely tailored to each individual and prepared by a specially trained compounding pharmacist. In fact, Foxx, who completed a residency in ob-gyn, believes that most women, and many men, can benefit from these drugs. “Even if you’re not having hot flashes, these hormones prevent heart disease and bone-density loss, help the skin, and help with cognition,” he says.

Popular as these bio-identical hormones have become, many doctors caution against using them. “Custom-compounded hormones may provide certain benefits. However, there may be risks,” warns NAMS. The Endocrine Society is also wary: “Formulations are not subject to FDA monitoring for dose, purity, safety, or efficacy, and there may be

ICONS BY LAURA GHARRITY

Hormone Replacement: Tough Decision

Since the 1940s, doctors have freely prescribed hormone-replacement drugs to women struggling with menopausal symptoms. Some of these drugs, long approved by the FDA, are made from mares’ urine and synthetic chemicals and go by the names Premarin and Prempro. Provera, a synthetic progesterone, was FDA-approved in the ‘60s.

In 2002 the Women’s Health Initiative issued a chilling report, saying that such drugs led to an increased risk for breast cancer, heart disease, and other problems. That sent women scurrying for alternatives, with many turning to bio-identical hormones. But there’s a great deal of confusion about what this term means. Some people use it to refer to plant-based drugs, usually derived from yams. (These are often called natural hormones.) Others use the phrase for pharmaceutical drugs, which are also often plant-derived and mimic human hormones.

Both are usually prepared by specially trained compounding pharmacists, who tailor each prescription to the individual. Both commonly come in the form of patches, creams, and gels, which doctors are finding to be more effective than oral medication. Neither plant- nor pharmaceutical-based hormones are FDA-approved, and mainstream medical groups, including the Endocrine Society and the North American Menopause Society (NAMS), warn against taking them. Some doctors advocate taking hormones for as short a period as possible, to get through the worst of the symptoms and minimize any risk from the medication.

But bio-identical substances are also found in a handful of drugs that are FDA-approved. These include estradiol patches such as Estraderm, Climara Pro, and Vivelle-Dot, as well as natural progesterone, Prometrium.

There may be a swing back to FDA-approved drugs. After five years of debate and fine-combing the Women’s Health Initiative results, NAMS recently “identified flaws in the study” and asserted that the benefits of hormone replacement therapy for women ages 50 to 60 outweigh the risks.



ILLUSTRATION BY JO THONG

additional and unknown risks associated with them. Postmarket surveys of such hormone preparations have uncovered inconsistencies in dose and quality.” Foxx counters that using well-established compounding pharmacists minimizes those risks.

AYURVEDA, ON THE OTHER hand, deems hormonal shifts totally natural. It’s just that menopausal symptoms are worse than ever, says Pratima Raichur, a chemist who runs Pratima Ayurvedic Skin Care, a day spa in New York City. “Because women are under so much more stress than they used to be, symptoms have gotten more and more extreme. We can manage the symptoms by managing the stress.”

Nancy Lonsdorf, M.D., the author of *The Ageless Woman: Natural Health and Beauty After Forty with Maharishi Ayurveda* and the former medical director at the Raj spa in rural Iowa, says menopause should be a kinder, gentler stage of life. “If a woman’s well rested, eating right, and taking good care of herself, it should be a smooth and easy time,” she explains. “And for about 25 percent of women, it is. But so many people are out of balance. Ayurvedic treatments focus on gentle rebalancing: getting lots of rest, eating cleansing foods, meditating, practicing yoga, and using a series of oil-based massage treatments—the most powerful being shirodhara,” in which a stream of warm oil is poured on the forehead. The Raj sees women start to get relief from serious symptoms after a stay of five or six days.

Part of Ayurveda’s appeal to me is its rock-solid science in this area: NAMS reports that one of the most proved methods of controlling hot flashes is paced respiration, like the rhythmic breathing practiced in many

yoga classes. And a recent study from the University of Massachusetts found that by using mindfulness-meditation techniques, women could reduce the severity of hot flashes by 40 percent.

BUT WHY CHOOSE A predominantly medical approach or a mainly holistic one when you can have both? I sign up for Journey: A Woman's Retreat at Canyon Ranch in Tucson, a seven-day program for "women in transition." On previous trips here, I've enjoyed the anonymity imparted by the size of the property—three pools, hundreds of staffers, and dozens of exercise classes and fitness activities. This program takes me to a different side of the resort, the Life Enhancement Center, a spa within the spa. It has its own dining room, gym, treatment area, and lecture rooms, which give it a medical-school-campus vibe. We spend the first evening sitting in a large circle, explaining why we're here. I have a creeping

Most menopause symptoms are stress-related and can be helped with lifestyle changes, says Christiane Northrup, M.D.

self-help campfire feeling, but it fades. Many of the other 25 participants are just like me: gradually waking up to the realization that we're stranded in middle age, with stressful lives and tucked-out ovaries. "I'm here," one tells the group, "because I am struggling to deal with a body that's just ravaged by all these hormonal changes."

Our days are filled with lectures on topics such as the effect of hormone fluctuations on heart health, metabolism, cancer risks, and mood. In between, there are medical tests and treatments. I opt for basic blood work

and urinalysis, but bone scans, hormone-level measurement, and fitness diagnostics are also available.

In a private session of nutritional counseling for the perimenopausal, I'm deluged with the most specific—and helpful—eating advice I've ever received. (And for a health writer, that's saying something.) Most of it comes from nutritionist Jenny Flora. She's not sold on soy as an extinguisher of hot flashes. "Many women say it does help, and others find it of no use. So try eating a serving a day for a few weeks, and if it's not working, then stop."

Flora recommends that I add a daily serving of organic yogurt to my diet, for the calcium and the probiotics. Also known as "good bacteria," these improve digestion and the immune function of the GI tract, the location of many receptors for serotonin, a mood elevator. "A healthier gut could mean more serotonin uptake," explains Flora, "which really helps women with the mood swings and sleep issues that sometimes

come with hormonal shifts."

I also get a reality check: The 5 pounds I say I need to lose, Flora ups to 15. And she doesn't sugarcoat it: I'm heading for a big fat weight snowball. "Because metabolism slows and muscle mass can start to shrink at menopause, most women gain weight," she says. "Since you're already overweight, you need to work on that now. It'll only be harder later." Flora suggests I strive to lose weight slowly, perhaps a pound every ten days. "The point is to make changes you can stick with."

Because I'm already practicing

yoga, taking a few steps deeper into Ayurveda feels right. I sign up for bindi-shirodhara, which may be the most blissful 100 minutes of my life. After my body has been exfoliated and massaged with rose-scented oil, a thin, gentle stream of warm oil is poured onto my forehead and allowed to run back into my hair. I lose all track of time, and when the treatment is over, I stumble back to my room, so intensely relaxed that I don't care that my hair looks like a circus clown's.

That induces me to request Jyotsna Sahni, M.D., who specializes in hormonal issues and has an interest in

Men and Andropause

While most hormonal-health conversations center on women, men experience their own hormonal changes. "Starting at age 35 or so, men's testosterone levels drop by about 1 or 2 percent a year," says Richard M. Foss, M.D., the director of the Medical and Skin Spa at the Agua Serena Spa at the Hyatt Grand Champions Resort in California. Foss often prescribes bio-identical hormones, which he says can affect fat distribution, energy level, and libido.

"Male menopause" results in a rapid decline of the Leydig cells, which produce testosterone, says Juan J. Remos, M.D., a physician at the Miami Institute for Age Management & Intervention, located in the Four Seasons Hotel. While men are born with 700 million of these cells in their testes, "about 6 million will die every year after you turn 30," he says. Remos prefers to treat men with a compounded gel, used nightly.

Ayurvedic medicine, to go over my test results. Hoping for a warm chat about the Eastern approach to perimenopause, I get another rude awakening: It turns out I'm a Western-health cliché, with a serious cholesterol problem. "If I were most doctors," she says, "I wouldn't let you leave here without a Lipitor prescription." Instead of a recommendation for weekly shirodhara, I walk out with orders to banish bacon, ice cream, butter, and cheese from my diet for six months and then get retested. "Losing weight will help," she says.

This is the first time a doctor has ever told me to lose weight, and it smarts. But the program's pace doesn't allow much time to pout. There are acupuncture and private yoga sessions and group hikes and exercise classes, including Fit Strip, in which our fishnet- and stiletto-clad instructor treats us as if we were lap dancers instead of refugees from middle age. It has us all in stitches. And while it's tempting to dismiss such fun as fluff, the reality is that laughs are essential. A recent study from Harvard Medical School found that depression risk doubles for women during perimenopause. Throughout the week, I hear echoes of that from participants. "Do you think it's hormones?" a woman asks me by the pool one morning. "Or is this just life?"

Surprisingly, despite the luscious treatments, the binders full of medical information, and the solid coaching from Canyon Ranch's experts, these intimate conversations are the best part of the week. One night toward the program's end, we share our experiences—believe it or not—around a campfire. "I came here because I misplaced my pizzazz," one woman says. "And I'm so happy that I found it again."

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Hormonal Skin Care

When hormones change, so does skin. The American Academy of Dermatologists says dropping estrogen levels cause skin to become thinner, less elastic, and more sensitive. Plenty of companies sell products that claim to help. Here are a few of the best:

1. B. Kamins Chemist Menopause Skin Cream

Made by the company's founding chemist for his wife's symptoms. The same vitamin-E-and-ceramide formula goes by the name Nutrient Replacement Cream for those who don't like the word *menopause*. US\$135, www.bkamins.com

2. Clarins Super Restorative Serum

Isoflavones help renew skin that's challenged by hormonal changes. US\$125, www.clarins.com

3. Dr. Sebagh Natural Replenishing Cream

A phytohormone complex with isoflavones and phytosterols to help menopausal skin. US\$130, www.beautyhabit.com

4. Kaplan MD Day Cream SPF15

Soy, black cohosh, and grapeseed extract "mimic the effects of estrogen." US\$185, www.kaplanmd.com

5. Lancôme Absolue Premium Bx Replenishing Lotion

From a range that relies on chemicals made from yams, soy, algae, and barley for intensive moisturizing. US\$110, www.lancome-usa.com

6. Shiseido Benefiance NutriPerfect Night Cream

Carnosine DP peptides and antioxidants boost elasticity. US\$92, www.sca.shiseido.com

7. This Works Skin Deep Dry Leg Oil

Helps soothe the common discomfort of dry-creek-bed-like legs. US\$60, www.beautyhabit.com



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