

The Herbal Approach To Menopause

The changes of menopause can cause some unwanted side effects. These days, more women are looking to natural supplements to ease this natural transition in life. Many women are turning to the ancient Chinese herbal solution of soy. It is becoming more common for soy to be added to various supplemental formulas for women. While it is true that soy is very useful in controlling the effects of menopause, it has little effect if other dietary changes are not made. To understand these dietary changes it is important to understand how Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) views menopause and the functions of the herbs and foods that are used to treat it.

TCM identifies several “patterns” of dysfunction in relation to menopause. In general they all tend to relate to what is called a “yin deficiency.” The functions of the body can be looked at as a balance of yin and yang. Yin is the cooling, sedate, liquid and structural functions of the body. Yang is the heat, energy and movement functions of the body. As we age the balance of these functions changes. In childhood, the balance is more in favor of the yang aspects. In adulthood, the functions of yin and yang are relatively balanced with just enough cooling function to control the heat.

When we start to approach old age, both yin and yang functions decrease. In men, this process happens relatively smoothly. In women however, the decrease in yin function happens relatively quickly and dramatically as menstrual cycles cease. The result is a loss of balance. The body struggles to quickly rebalance the functioning of the body. Yin (cooling function) decreases, allowing yang (heat function) to be in relative excess resulting in hot flashes, irritability and other emotional imbalances. Eventually balance is regained. The goal in TCM is to try to speed the process of that recovery, or to prevent the imbalance of function from getting too extreme in the first place.

The obvious treatment is to “nourish” yin function in the body. An herbalist will prescribe herbal formulas that nourish the yin and also clear heat from the body. Herbs are essentially extreme foods, so proper food choices often play an important role in how well the herbs will work. Herbs and foods are classified by the effects that they have on the body. Some foods/herbs are cooling in nature, some increase heat, some nourish energy while others disperse or “move” energy around the body.

The most common yin nourishing food is soy. In Asia it is readily available and is a common part of the diet. Soy is easy to digest, relatively inexpensive

and easy to prepare.

It is not surprising then, that soy was generally recommended by herbalists. But soy alone will not treat the menopause if it is combined with foods that are hot or dispersing in nature. Examples of hot dispersing foods would be, onions, garlic, ginger, peppers (salsa, tabasco), and most spices. Results are better if there is a greater focus on yin nourishing foods such as:

- soy (best fermented as soy milk, tofu, miso)
- eggs
- “Jello” gelatin
- nuts, seeds and nut oils
- shellfish, shrimp and lobster
- fish (especially oily fish like salmon, herring, tuna)
- beans and legumes (black, kidney, pinto, aduki etc.)
- rice and rice milk

Other foods that are cooling in nature include:

- cocoa (hint: chocolate soymilk or dark chocolate)
- mung beans
- tropical fruit
- green tea
- melons (especially watermelon and honeydew)

It is a good idea to decrease coffee intake which can be very dispersing rather than nourishing in nature. Smoking, while definitely not good for your health, has the particular affect of adding heat to the body as well as “drying” and decreasing yin function in the body. Smoking, as well as drinking alcohol which is also considered warm, should be decreased because their effects increase the yin deficiency in the body.

Eating yin-nourishing foods can dramatically reduce the symptoms of menopause. For a woman with menopausal symptoms, it is important to pay attention to how various foods and activities affect how you feel. That way you can gain some control over this unavoidable change in life, as opposed to letting it control you.



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