Harnessing the Power Surges of Mid-Life

The cartoon says it all. Two mid-life women are washing dishes. One says to the other, “The news is saying there are menopause predictors now. For me it was just a matter of counting the dead bodies in my trail” (www.minniepauz.com).We’re all aware of the stereotype—fuzzy thinking, hot flashing, emotionally erratic, facing down the demons of a rapidly aging body. Happily, the physical changes of this time of life are not the whole story. Those of us who have experienced or are experiencing the perils of middle age are also acutely aware of the joys and rewards of this time of life, as well. After all, we’ve raised children, established careers, experienced life and are reaping the rewards in wisdom, confidence and a new found sense of self. There is so much for us to look forward to, so much adventure still to experience. At the same time, it seems that our bodies are fighting us every step of the way. Perhaps the key to success in mid-life is to step out of the fight. A better route might just be to strive to understand our bodies, to listen to their wisdom, and make them allies with us as we move through the next 30 plus years of our lives.

The defining physical phenomenon for women at mid-life is menopause. Officially, menopause is designated as when a woman has not had a menstrual period for 12 months. Though this usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 52, it does not happen suddenly. In fact, the menopausal transition or perimenopause can begin as early as age 35. Subtle changes to the monthly cycle, and mild or erratic symptoms such as hot flashes, and sleep and mood changes can signal gradually declining fertility and the first leg of the journey toward menopause. This is the time to pay attention and come to know your body well. Your later life and health could depend on it. In order to interpret what your body is saying to you it is important to understand the physiologic changes of this stage of life.

Female fertility is a complex process involving a mix of hormones and sensitive physiological feed-back systems. In simplest terms, the ovaries are the major source of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone which are responsible for regulating the menstrual cycle. As an egg or ovum is released from the ovary every 28 days or so, these hormone levels rise and fall in an exquisite orchestration that results in menstruation or, if the egg is fertilized, in implantation of the egg in the uterine wall and pregnancy. Each ovary holds only a finite number of ova which diminish over the years until the woman becomes infertile. Ovum release becomes irregular and sporadic throughout the mid-life years producing variability in the secretion of estrogen and progesterone and the accompanying symptoms of the menopausal transition. When ovulation ceases, a woman’s body has to adjust to a dramatic drop in estrogen levels. Decreased estrogen also puts her at an increased risk of disease processes, in particular osteoporosis, coronary vascular diseases, and cancers. Estrogen receptors are found in many tissues throughout the body. This accounts for the array of menopausal symptoms ranging from joint and muscle aches, headache, hot flashes and night sweats, incontinence and palpitations to mood swings, fuzzy thinking, insomnia, and forgetfulness. The menopausal transition can make you feel like a stranger in your own body. It can take some time to adjust, but do not despair. There are proven techniques and treatments that can make the change a lot easier to manage.

First, it is important to remember that mid-life change is not an illness. It is a natural process that is experienced differently by each individual woman. As the body slowly comes into harmony with its new hormonal environment, there are many ways that you can support and assist the adjustment to allow you to have the best transition possible. Developing healthy life habits is the most important strategy for managing the menopausal transition and decreasing your risk of disease. A diet rich in a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, adequate lean protein and healthy fats is essential for good health at any time of life. Decreasing your intake of sugar, salt, caffeine and saturated fat and maintaining an optimum weight can also decrease some of the symptoms of menopause as well as your risk of cardiovascular disease. Daily activity that includes aerobic exercise, toning and flexibility exercises can keep the body parts moving efficiently through mid-life and beyond. Listening with the inner ear to what your body has to say may be just the impetus that you need to embark on needed lifestyle alterations. Small, gradual changes are more likely to be sustainable and you will be rewarded with a decrease in menopausal symptoms, more energy, and an outlook that can take on the world. Specific measures can also be taken to manage the most common and troubling menopausal symptoms: hot flashes and night sweats, mood changes, urinary incontinence, and insomnia.

It has been estimated that 50 to 85% of women experience hot flashes and night sweats at sometime throughout their menopausal transition. Hot flashes are usually more intense and frequent late in the menopausal transition and the first 1-2 years after menopause is completed. They happen when the small blood vessels in the skin dilate and more blood flows into the area causing heat and redness. This is the result of changes in the transmission of nerve impulses to the blood vessels because of fluctuating hormonal levels. Common triggers for hot flashes include spicy foods, hot drinks, caffeine, alcohol, white sugar, stress, hot weather, hot tubs or saunas, tobacco, and intense emotion like anger. Learning to avoid your triggers may be all that is needed to control your hot flashes. You may want to keep a journal to record your observations. Learning stress reduction techniques, evaluating your emotional timbre, and establishing a peer support group are other methods that women have found helpful in managing hot flashes. Improving your diet by decreasing sugar, caffeine and fat, and increasing whole grains, fruits and vegetables may also be effective in decreasing the severity and frequency of hot flashes. Adding soy, in the form of tofu, soy milk or soy nuts, to the diet can provide some added plant estrogen that may be effective in reducing hot flashes. Other tips for managing this symptom are to dress in layers, sip cold water, keep a fan handy, keep a cold pack under your pillow and turn your pillow frequently through the night.

Mood changes can be very distressing for women particularly if they create a sense of being out of control. Anxiety, fatigue, irritability and depressed mood are common experiences during the menopausal transition. Trusting your health care provider enough to discuss this issue can help you to determine the cause, assess for clinical depression, and determine the most appropriate treatment. Stress reduction measures such as deep breathing exercises, massage, and regular physical activity can be effective in stabilizing emotions. It is also important to take the time to care for yourself and indulge in enjoyable, self-nurturing activities.

Urinary incontinence occurs as a result of thinning and drying of urinary mucosa and loss of tissue tone related to decreased estrogen levels. It can be managed by drinking adequate amounts of water to keep the urine clear and pale yellow in color, as well as by avoiding foods and beverages that are high in acid or caffeine. These include citrus, tomatoes, coffee and soft drinks. Kegel exercises that strengthen the muscles of the pelvic floor are easy to learn and simple to do several times throughout the day. They are effective in reducing incontinence episodes.

To combat insomnia, you may find that a regular sleep schedule and routine work wonders. Going to bed and waking at the same time every day, even on weekends, may be all that is needed to train your body to go to sleep. A bedtime routine that signals to the brain that it is time for sleep can include relaxing with a book or soft music, and snacking on cereal or peanut butter and toast accompanied by a cup of chamomile tea. Sleep is more likely to be induced in a room that is dark, cool and quiet, and used only for that purpose. Experimenting and finding out what works best for you is essential for getting more sleep, as it is for learning to manage other symptoms of menopause.

If you have listened to your body and made the needed lifestyle changes, but your symptoms still are intolerable, you may want to consider menopausal hormone therapy. Estrogen and progesterone, alone or in combination, can be used in many different forms. They are available in pill form, as a skin patch, in a vaginal ring insert, as implants, gels or sprays. Your health care provider can suggest the best therapy depending on your symptoms. Whatever form of hormone replacement you use it is important that you have the lowest dose that brings the necessary results, and that you take it for the shortest amount of time possible. You also need to know the risks of hormone therapy and what side effects to expect. Side effects may include breast tenderness, spotting or return of monthly periods, cramping or bloating. Evidence from the Women’s Health Initiative and the Nurses’ Health Study in the United States indicated that there may be serious risks with hormone replacement, including increased chance of heart disease, stroke, blood clots and breast cancer. Further, more recent analysis of the results of these studies have suggested that risks are lower for women who begin hormone therapy at a younger age than for those who began taking hormone replacement after menopause was complete. Risk may also be determined by personal and family history of heart disease, high cholesterol and cancer. It is essential that you thoroughly discuss the balance between your personal risk and benefits with your health care provider. Making an informed decision about this very personal choice is your prerogative at this stage of life.

The physical changes of menopause grab our attention, making us clearly aware of this profound developmental stage of our lives. Menopause is not just a physical phenomenon. It is also an opportunity for personal growth and empowerment. During this time of life women often awaken to an enriched sense of creativity, vitality and ambition. We find new opportunities for meaningful service to our families, our communities and to ourselves. For once we are motivated by our desires and needs, not those of society. Our answers and approval come from deep within us rather than from outside. We examine our lives, revisit unfinished business from the past, and make plans for the future. Given the intellectual, psychological and spiritual richness of this time of life, we owe it to ourselves to nurture our bodies as well. By listening to our bodies needs and by making nutrition, sleep and exercise priorities in our lives we can make friends with our changing bodies. We need to---there is so much adventure still ahead!