

HRT for postmenopausal symptoms can be recommended as an alternative to hormone replacement therapy

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Herbal and complementary medicines could be recommended as an alternative to hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for treating postmenopausal symptoms says a new review published today in *The Obstetrician and Gynaecologist (TOG)*.

The review outlines the advantages and limitations of both pharmacological and herbal and complementary treatments for women with postmenopausal symptoms.

The menopause is defined as the time after a woman's [menstrual periods](#) have ceased (12 months after a woman's final menstrual period). It is associated with an estrogen deficiency and can cause an increase in [vasomotor symptoms](#) (hot flushes), genitourinary symptoms (vaginal dryness, sexual dysfunction, frequent [urinary tract infections](#), [urinary incontinence](#)), and musculoskeletal symptoms (joint pain) as well as sleep and [mood disturbance](#).

One of the most common [menopausal symptoms](#) is hot flushes; approximately two-thirds of postmenopausal women will experience them, and 20% of women can experience them for up to 15 years, states the review.

[Estrogen deficiency](#) can also lead to longer-term health issues such as cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. While pharmacological agents

are available to treat postmenopausal symptoms, many non-pharmacological treatment options are also available.

HRT is the most effective treatment of hot flushes, improving symptoms in 80 – 90% of women, says the review. However, the author notes that there are possible health risks associated with HRT, such as links to breast cancer, blood clots, stroke, and cardiovascular problems.

Due to these possible risks, other treatment options may be equally effective, such as behaviour modification and herbal and complimentary medicines, says the author.

The review states that as many as 50 - 75% of postmenopausal women use herbal options to treat hot flushes, and of the complimentary therapies, soy, red clover and black cohosh have been the most investigated.

Soy is the most common plant containing estrogen, found naturally in food and supplements. Previous research has shown a reduction in hot flush symptoms with soy ranging from 20 - 55%. Red clover, a legume also containing estrogen, and black cohosh, a plant originating from the eastern United States and Canada, have also been reported to ease postmenopausal symptoms.

The author of the review recommends these herbal treatments as there are no significant adverse side effects associated with them, as long as they are used in women who do not have a personal history of breast cancer, are not at high risk for [breast cancer](#), and are not taking tamoxifen. However, the review notes that herbal medicines are not regulated in many countries, and therefore the contents of a given product may vary from sample to sample.

Iris Tong, Director of Women's Primary Care at the Women's Medicine

Collaborative, The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, Rhode Island, and author of the review said:

"Up to 75% of women use herbal and complimentary medicines to treat their postmenopausal symptoms. Therefore, it is vitally important for healthcare providers to be aware of and informed about the non-pharmacological therapies available for women who are experiencing postmenopausal symptoms and who are looking for an alternative to HRT."

TOG's Editor –in-Chief, Jason Waugh said:

"Postmenopausal symptoms can be very distressing and it is important to review the advantages and limitations of the non-pharmacological treatments available as well as the pharmacological ones. Even simple behaviour modification can make a difference to postmenopausal symptoms, including keeping the room temperature cool, wearing layered clothing, relaxation techniques and smoking cessation."

More information: Tong, IL. Nonpharmacological treatment of postmenopausal symptoms. *The Obstetrician & Gynaecologist* 2013; 15:19–25

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