

Menopausal symptoms may be lessened with young children in the house

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Tierney Lorenz

A new study by researchers at The Kinsey Institute and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center has found that the timeless,

multicultural tradition of grandmothering might have an unexpected benefit: helping some women temper their hot flashes and night sweats during menopause.

The researchers, two clinicians and a bioanthropologist, examined how close relationships can help [women](#) in midlife with this inevitable change—with the clinicians looking for therapeutic benefits that might help patients deal with this unpredictable, poorly understood transition, and the bioanthropologist predicting an evolutionary connection. Their study, which focused on the relationship between mid-life women and young children, found that women who underwent rapid [menopause](#), caused by the surgical removal of ovaries, had fewer [hot flashes](#) and night sweats when young children lived in their homes.

The study was published in *Menopause: the Journal of the North American Menopause Society*. Study authors are Tierney Lorenz, postdoctoral fellow at The Kinsey Institute at Indiana University Bloomington, Bonnie A McGregor, researcher at University of Washington's Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, and Virginia J. Vitzthum, professor of anthropology and senior research scientist at The Kinsey Institute.

The study involved 117 participants in the study; 69 women were menopausal or postmenopausal at the time of their surgery, with 29 of them having at least one child at home, and 48 women were premenopausal, with 28 of them having at least one child at home. Researchers measured hot flashes and night sweats just before the surgery and then again at two months, six months and 12 months post-surgery.

"These are intriguing findings," Lorenz said. "For women who were menopausal when our study began, those with young children at home actually showed more symptoms of hot flashes. But the women who

underwent rapid menopause because of the surgical removal of their ovaries showed a dramatic reduction of symptoms."

The process of menopause, when ovaries no longer produce eggs and menstruation stops, varies widely. Some women have almost no bothersome symptoms, while some women experience almost crippling symptoms. Lorenz said a small subset of women experience very severe effects longer than would be expected.

The numerous studies on menopause have generated little consensus, Lorenz said, leaving women with a wide range of questionable treatments, such as supplements, hormonal treatments and even hot yoga. This new study is one of the first involving social interaction and menopause symptoms to control for the age of the women and also for the type of relationship—only relationships with young children were considered.

The study got its start with Vitzthum's interest in the evolutionary role of social structures—grandmothering in this case. The institution of grandmothering can be seen across cultures, but is it really necessary for the survival of the species? Is there an immediate benefit to the women? Is it a coincidence that women often undergo the physiological change of menopause at an age when they might have young grandchildren on hand?

Lorenz cautioned that the findings of their study cannot be generalized to all women, particularly since menopause affects women so differently. But they point to a need to examine the hormone oxytocin more carefully because of its possible role in the results. Oxytocin is associated with nurturing care and a wide range of effects across the body, including interactions involved in regulating body temperature. It also can affect mood and sleeping patterns, which can be disturbed during menopause. She also thinks it is significant that the benefits only

involved young children.

"The fact the effects observed were limited to only women with children younger than 13 years suggests that parity was not sufficient to produce changes in flashes and points instead to the increased nurturance needs of young children," the authors wrote in the journal article. "Presence of [young children](#) at home may moderate development of hot flashes during the menopausal transition."

Provided by Indiana University

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