



*Many women are confused about what alternatives are available to cope with many of the symptoms of menopause. Dr. Zacher outlines options for hot flashes as well as other symptoms that are common at this time in a woman's life.*

— Beverly Vaughn, Director of the  
“Menopause and You” Program



*Millicent G. Zacher, DO,  
Gynecology and Reproductive  
Endocrinology,  
Bryn Mawr Hospital*

## What are alternative therapies?

Just when we thought we had the right formula for relieving menopausal symptoms, we woke up one July morning to the Women's Health Initiative results. Hormone replacement therapy, in the doses we were using, had enough adverse effects to make us rethink what we were doing. Overnight, for many women, they discontinued medications. Back were the hot flashes, mood swings, vaginal dryness, sleep difficulties and decreased libido. For centuries, women had been using herbs, acupuncture, meditation, yoga, nutritional supplements, alone or in combination, to ease the menopausal passage. Why not use these again? Are they safe? Do they work? The National Institutes of Health (NIH) have been asking the same questions; their studies are on going but are beginning to give us direction.

## Herbs and Plant Products: Botanicals

Approximately half of the medications we use come from plants or their biological chemicals. Botanicals are the most frequently used alternatives to synthesized hormones. When not prepared by pharmaceutical companies, the therapeutic effects of plants are found in natural bulk herbs that are raw or dried to make powders, teas or capsules. Herbs can also be found as oils or tinctures

(alcohol extracted liquids). The fresher the herbs, the closer the product is to its natural state, the more strength it will have. Plants do not make estrogens as we have come to know them. Plants make chemicals which exert weak estrogen effects. Some of these chemicals have been used by pharmaceutical companies to make estrogen and progesterone compounds. There are three groups of dietary plant estrogens or phytoestrogens. A brief list of botanicals and their suggested uses is found below.

### For Hot Flashes

Soy products: effects are variable. Soy foods are not necessarily a reliable source of isoflavones since processing may alter biological strength. Effects occur by attaching to tissue with estrogen activity. Women with estrogen dependent cancers of the breast or uterus should consult their doctor. Some studies suggest some benefit. Fermented soy products, such as tofu, may be the best source of isoflavones.

Black Cohosh: an herb with estrogenic effects, is somewhat more beneficial than soy products. The same caution applies to estrogen dependent cancers. Found on its own or in teas and Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, it is the leading botanical in Europe and the United States. A German pharmaceutical company manufactures it as Remifemin®. This is how it is commonly used in Europe. It is available in the U.S. without prescription. There are no safety studies past 6 months.

Dong Quai: commonly used in Chinese medicine. No studies suggest it is beneficial. Not to be used in pregnancy or when nursing. Excessive amounts may cause bleeding.

Evening Primrose: also used for breast pain and bladder symptoms. Studies do not suggest benefit.

Ginseng: questionable benefit.

This is intended as an information resource providing guidelines for women. As always, check with your own healthcare practitioner with your specific concerns and questions.

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**For Mood Disturbances**

St. John's Wort and Valerian Root: some mild effects. These may interfere with other commercial mood enhancing drugs that positively help a brain chemical known as serotonin.

**For Vaginal Dryness**

Wild and Mexican Yam products: claim to be progesterone substitutes. There are no human pathways to change yams into progesterone. There are no studies to suggest benefit.

Be aware, botanicals are not regulated as drugs, but as dietary supplements. Manufacturers voluntarily are responsible for the safety and strength of their products. This allows considerable variation among products. An excellent reference is Susan Weed's *Menopausal Years*.

**Acupuncture:**

The familiar needle therapy is part of the larger Chinese medical tradition based upon energy and body areas related to symptomatology. Preliminary information from one study suggests a positive effect on hot flashes. Further research is expected. Acupuncturists must be licensed in Pennsylvania.

**Nutrition and Nutritional Supplements:**

In addition to phytoestrogens, a better sense of well being and body image can be achieved with a balanced diet. Calcium and vitamin D, by diet or supplements, have long been recognized for bone health. Vitamin B complex, helpful for depression, is naturally found in green vegetables, whole wheat and brewer's yeast.

DHEA, a natural androgen produced by the adrenal gland, is sold as an over the counter dietary supplement. As we age, this hormone normally decreases. Studies have shown beneficial effects on hot flashes and on mood in doses as low as 25 mg per day. DHEA is produced as

tablets and a 10% cream. Further studies are needed.

**Lifestyle modifications:**

Exercise, relaxation techniques, yoga, biofeedback and massage can reduce both the severity and frequency of hot flashes. Further research is needed to see if this is a placebo effect. Relaxation breathing, however, has been shown to be beneficial. This technique involves deep breathing from the abdomen and reducing your breaths to 8 – 10 per minute. Relaxation is good for overall health. Avoiding spicy foods, keeping the temperature low, reduction of alcohol and smoking cessation are also helpful.

**Other pharmaceutical agents:**

Replacing estrogens improves mood and hot flashes; the link with other brain chemicals, such as serotonin, has long been thought to exist. Serotonin loss causes mood changes and may be related to hot flashes. Using agents that enhance serotonin can help with mood and give some relief from hot flashes. These are prescription drugs given by your doctor that can be used with other forms of therapy.

**Bio-identical Hormone Therapy:**

For some women, estrogens are the only therapy that relieves hot flashes, mood swings and vaginal dryness. Customizing treatment to individual needs and utilizing non-pharmacologic doses of hormones, has led to bio-identical hormone replacement. Taken as tablets, creams or suppositories, they are produced by specialized pharmacies. Dosages are based upon hormone levels and or symptoms. As with commercial hormones, there are patients who are not candidates for this treatment. Traditional estrogen producers are beginning to utilize lower doses of plant derived hormones.



The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologist suggest herbal remedies do not alleviate hot flashes but serotonin related medications do. The College also considers bioidentical hormones experimental since there are no studies evaluating their benefits or side effects. Estrogens help depression, but should not be used instead of mood changing medications. NIH health alerts are available at [www.nccam.nih.gov/health/alerts/menopause](http://www.nccam.nih.gov/health/alerts/menopause). The FDA recommends estrogen therapy in the lowest dose for the shortest period of time to alleviate symptoms. Alternative and traditional therapies can be used in combination.

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**For more information, please call toll-free, 1-888-876-8764, email [whs@mlhs.org](mailto:whs@mlhs.org), or click on the “Links to Other Helpful Resources.”**

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