

# THE SAME BODY DIFFERENT SYMPTOMS

**T**he increased life expectancy means that the woman of today, after the menopause, has almost half of her adult life still to live, and she is therefore almost obliged to learn live with the changes that this brings about. None of us can escape it, and for this reason the health and well-being of women during this period has become of vital importance over the last few years.

The menopause is simply the moment in which the ovaries cease producing female hormones in sufficient quantity and the menstruation cycle stops. From that moment on, a new stage begins, known as the climacteric, or post-menopause. It must be made clear that in no way is this considered an illness or a pathological process, although some women go through difficult years due to various symptoms arising from hormonal changes.

However, the symptoms are very variable and not all women experience them. Amongst the most frequent are hot flushes, increased sweating, mood swings, changes in skin and hair, loss of sexual appetite, dryness in the vagina, insomnia, and other symptoms. There might also be some effects that directly affect our health, such as, for example, an increased risk of osteoporosis.



## HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Until now, the most effective way known for alleviating the various symptoms deriving from the menopause is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), consisting of administering estrogen or a combination of estrogen and progesterone, in order to replace the natural hormones once the ovaries have stopped producing them. Apart from improving the symptoms of menopause, HRT can be of considerable benefit to our health, such as by preventing osteoporosis, reducing the risk of bone fractures and, according to some reports, a reduction in the risk of suffering colorectal cancer.

Generally speaking, HRT is recommended to women who already experience menopausal symptoms. There are different ways of taking the hormones: the most frequent way is orally (in tablets) and patches, but there are other methods, such as in a cream that is applied daily and subcutaneous implants that are placed under the skin by the doctor and last for six months.

### How does the menopause transform our life?

- Hot flushes
- Increased sweating
- Mood swings
- Alteration in the texture of the skin and hair
- Loss of sexual appetite
- Weight increase
- Insomnia

Over the past few years, there has been increasing support for a completely natural alternative coming from soy derivatives, as these contain natural estrogens called phytoestrogens that, although they are not usually quite as effective as HRT on the menopause symptoms, they have proved to be efficient in reducing the dreaded hot flushes. Furthermore, some lines of investigation reveal that they reduce dryness in the vagina and have a beneficial effect on cholesterol, reducing therefore the risk of heart disease.

## RISKS AND BENEFITS OF HRT

The fact is that during recent years there has been much controversy regarding the risks involved in HRT: some reports warned about the negative effects and were widely publicized, creating considerable social alarm. But nowadays the scientific world is aware that, although HRT is not completely exempt from risk, in many cases the risks are minimal compared

with the benefits achieved in health and quality of life. It is known that by using HRT, there is potential increase in the risk of getting breast cancer and this



increase is greater in proportion to the number of years that the treatment is followed. However, it is difficult to assess this increase: the Spanish Association for Menopause Research sets the figure at 1.6% in women who take hormone therapy over a period of 10 years. It must also be stressed that breast cancer is usually diagnosed at an earlier stage in women who use HRT than in others, as they usually undergo a stricter control of their health, with gynaecological check-ups at least once a year. More and more information is being obtained with regard to the immediate benefits of HRT, and in fact, in countries such as the United States or Great Britain, their use is very commonplace, comprising between 25% and 30% of post-menopausal women, while in Spain, the percentage does not reach 10%.

As with any health-related subject that creates controversy, the best thing to do is to collect as much information as possible, and there are many comprehensive web-sites available for this, such as the Spanish Association for Menopause Research ([www.aeem.es](http://www.aeem.es)), or the International Menopause Society ([www.imsociety.org](http://www.imsociety.org)), that help women to become better informed about the risks and benefits of HRT. Every case must be evaluated individually, but women for whom the menopause has caused a reduction in their quality of life, should not turn their back on HRT, they should consult their gynaecologist and, with all the information at hand, they can take their own decision.

**Juan Larracochea - Obstetrician & Gynaecologist**  
**Contact: (34) 952 816 981**