

# FIGHT

menopause

# FIGHT FATIGUE

## Becoming the Queen of Herself

This description of a woman in menopause from women's health expert Christiane Northrup, MD, is a wonderful way to think of this important developmental milestone (<http://www.drnorthrup.com/wisdom-of-menopause/>). If you are in, or approaching, menopause, you are part of a demographic that is nearly 50 million strong—and generally satisfied with life. A Gallup poll found the majority of postmenopausal women were happier and more fulfilled than when they were younger.

## Menopause

Menopause marks the end of your childbearing years and begins when your ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone. You are in menopause when you've completed 12 consecutive months without periods. The average age of menopause is 51.

Some women make the transition into menopause with few noticeable signs. Other women experience some of these symptoms. They can vary widely in severity and duration.

- Hot flashes and night sweats (hot flashes during sleep)
- Vaginal dryness (due to lack of estrogen)
- Mood changes, such as depression or anxiety
- Cognitive changes, such as trouble reasoning or remembering
- Sleep disturbances

## Menopause and Sleep Disturbances

If you are in menopause and have trouble sleeping, you are not alone: roughly half of menopausal women report having sleep problems. Hot flashes, mood symptoms, medical conditions and lifestyle factors (such as smoking or drinking) can disrupt sleep in menopausal women. Furthermore, the brain chemicals you need for sleep change during menopause.

Menopausal women often struggle with insomnia. They have trouble falling asleep. They wake up frequently or too early. Or, they just don't have a very restful night's sleep. During menopause, you may even begin to snore!

Getting adequate sleep is important to your overall health. Sleep reduces your risk of cardiovascular and other diseases, helps you maintain a healthy weight and influences your mood. In fact, deep sleep may be the single most effective way to metabolize excess stress hormones (C. Northrup).

Lack of sleep can wreak havoc on your health and well-being. It puts you at greater risk for accidents, reduces your ability to concentrate and make good decisions and negatively affects your mood.

## Fight Fatigue

There are many ways to help ensure you get plenty of quality sleep—even during menopause.

### Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene is a fancy term for creating rituals or practices that signal to your body it's time to go to sleep. You already engage in sleep hygiene routines when you wash your face and brush your teeth before you go to bed.

Here are a few additional suggestions for creating good sleep hygiene.

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Sleep in a dark, cool room.
- Limit bedroom activities to sleeping and intimacy.
- Take a warm bath or shower before bed.
- Relax with a cup of herbal (non-caffeinated!) tea or drink a warm glass of milk. The tryptophan in milk makes serotonin, a neurotransmitter that plays a role in mood, so it helps relax you.

## Physical Activity

Regular exercise boosts mood, promotes a good night's sleep, helps you maintain a healthy weight and reduces your risk of disease. Although research to establish a positive effect of exercise on menopausal symptoms has produced mixed results, some studies do suggest an association between exercise and less severe menopausal symptoms.

Since physical activity is so good for you, and it *may* help reduce menopausal symptoms, try to get at least 30 minutes of exercise most days.

## Complementary Health Practices

Complementary health practices harness the power of the mind to influence the body. Many people use these techniques to maintain wellness or manage disease symptoms. They may also help with menopausal symptoms.

**Mind-body practices.** Stress can aggravate menopause symptoms. Acupuncture, yoga, tai chi, qigong, relaxation exercises and deep breathing help people manage stress and may minimize sleep disruptions. The scientific evidence demonstrating that mind-body practices alleviate menopausal symptoms is inconclusive. However, they are generally safe and some women do find them helpful.

### Herbs and supplements.

- 2 percent progesterone cream. Dr. Northrup suggests rubbing ¼ to ½ teaspoon of 2 percent progesterone cream into your skin daily.
- Valerian and chamomile. These herbs, available as teas and in supplement form, are associated with increased relaxation and improved sleep.
- Melatonin. Melatonin is a natural hormone involved in your daily sleep cycle. You can take it as a supplement or drink 2 oz. of tart cherry juice concentrate daily close to bedtime.
- 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP). 5-HTP supplements increase levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood and sleep.

- Over-the-counter phytoestrogens. Phytoestrogens, such as ginseng, extract of red clover or black cohosh, are plant hormones similar to estrogen and may reduce hot flashes.

Herbs and supplements are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, and research studies regarding their safety and effectiveness are inconclusive. Furthermore, these products can have negative side effects and may interact with some medications.

**Keep in mind:** Just because products are labeled “natural” does not necessarily mean they are safe. Talk to your doctor before using herbs or supplements and work with a licensed complementary health practitioner who can help you select products from reliable manufacturers and in appropriate doses.

## Hormone Therapy

Hormone replacement therapy (estrogen and progesterone) or estrogen-only replacement therapy relieve hormonal symptoms and therefore may improve sleep quality. However, the Women's Health Initiative (a large study) found hormone therapy may increase your risk for cardiovascular disease, dementia and breast cancer. If menopausal symptoms are causing persistent sleep disruptions, talk to your physician about whether a short-term course of low-dose hormonal therapy is right for you.

## Medications

In preliminary studies, 7.5 mg capsules of paroxetine significantly reduced the average frequency and severity of hot flashes and night sweats over several months. Physicians use paroxetine in higher doses as an antidepressant. Although paroxetine is generally well tolerated, medications are not right for everyone.

### Other strategies to fight fatigue

- Skip sleeping pills, especially on an ongoing basis. They can be addictive and lose effectiveness over time.
- Don't drink alcohol or caffeine later in the day.
- Avoid watching TV (especially the news) or spending time on the computer right before bed.
- Don't eat a large meal close to bedtime.
- Try taking Epsom salt baths before going to bed. The magnesium sulfate in the Epsom salt is absorbed into your blood stream through your skin. It helps relax your muscles and nerves.
- Avoid daytime naps or keep them short (about 30 minutes).