Heart Palpitations and Menopause

by AFRA WILLMORE

Are Heart Palpitations and Menopause Connected?

My friend has been really unlucky with her menopause experience. She started exhibiting symptoms years ago and now, well into her 50s, is still not done. And what does she consider the worst symptom of her menopause? Palpitations.

I have been lucky and not suffered this, but some people do and can find them quite distressing – especially if they don't realize they can be menopause related. Some women also endure panic attacks and more generalized anxiety which is not helped by the worry about a frighteningly fluttering heart. Add to this an unsympathetic doctor who thinks they are dealing with psychosomatic symptoms and you can end up with a very unhappy woman.

In fact, heart palpitations can be caused by our old friend progesterone. Falling levels of this hormone can cause anxiety, tension headaches, digestive issues, palpitations or even full-blown panic attacks which can lead some people to become almost agoraphobic or unable to work.

What are Palpitations?

Let's focus on palpitations. What are they? Well my friend says she feels like her heart is racing, while other people report feeling as if their heart is fluttering, skipping a beat every now and then. Some people say they simply can feel their heart beating while others report they can feel extra beats.

Palpitations are all of these - the heart can beat anything from an extra 16 to 200 beats a minute, or can skip a beat every now and then. Usually if they are being caused by oestrogen dominance the sensation should last only a few seconds or a minute or two, and many women report it's most common during a hot flash.

In the case of menopause-related palpitations, the heart issues may be being triggered by HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy) or hormone imbalance. There's a lose/lose situation right there!

Other Causes of Palpitations

- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- Stress
- Food additives, particularly MSG (Monosodium Glutamate) often found in Chinese takeaway dishes and processed food
- Nicotine
- Dehydration
- Pseudoephidrine in decongestants
- Some ingredients in diet pills
- Rich or spicy food

- Recreational drugs, and
- Any activity which releases adrenalin.

There are also medical conditions aside from perimenopause or menopause which can cause palpitations – anemia, heart disease and heart valve problems, low blood sugar and thyroid conditions, to name just a few.

With that long list of things that can cause palpitations it's a wonder we don't all suffer from them!

It's important to rule out serious illnesses that might be causing your particular issues, so it's worth mentioning them to your healthcare provider even if you are fairly sure they are hormone related.

Most doctors would order an ECG (electrocardiogram) which will assess heart rate and rhythm. The ECG may of course give normal results unless you actually experience palpitations during the test, but your doctor should follow up with other tests to ensure your symptoms are not being caused by a more serious underlying condition.

Next page: treating palpitations.

Treating Palpitations

My friend went through all the tests and was prescribed beta blockers, which is a standard treatment for menopause-related palpitations and anxiety. She says she does feel it has helped reduce the severity and frequency of her attacks, and helped her feel calmer.

Beta blockers (beta-adrenoceptor blocking agents) are generally used to treat angina, heart failure and high blood pressure. They decrease the heart's activity by blocking the actions of hormones like adrenaline. They can also be used to treat migraine, anxiety and palpitations.

There are different kinds – your doctor will be able to prescribe the most suitable for you – and mostly you take them once a day. It's important to stay in touch with whoever prescribed them as you may experience side effects like sleep disturbance or depression and stopping the drug suddenly can make things worse.

If you don't want to resort to medication just yet try cutting down (or out) nicotine, energy drinks, diet pills and caffeine, which remember is not just found in tea and coffee but also in many sodas as well as chocolate.

If you feel palpitations or a panic or anxiety attack coming on, especially when you are doing something active, stop, sit or lie down and breathe deeply and slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth. This should help end the attack sooner.

It's true that since hormone imbalance is often at the root of symptoms like this it's important to eat healthily and get regular exercise, even if that just means getting off the bus a stop earlier or offering to take your neighbour's dogs for a walk every few days. Yoga or meditation might also help cut down on stress and therefore palpitations and panic attacks too.

Yes, I know it's dull but believe me when I tell you the combination of eating a balanced diet and exercise is proven to help keep hormone levels more stable than drowning your sorrows in wine and cake whilst watching re-runs on the sofa. It's got to be better than feeling your heart is going to beat right out of your body!