Menopause and Allergies

by ANGELA FINLAY

The Connection Between Menopause and Allergies

Typical menopause symptoms are bad enough, but add to those the scratching, sneezing, swelling and coughing of allergies, and you're face with a very uncomfortable routine. Many women discover new or worsening allergies as they move through perimenopause, and fluctuating hormones are largely to blame for this unwelcome change.

While you can't do anything to stop the onset of menopause, you can help your body through the transition, and ease your allergy symptoms. If you first learn the reasons behind your allergies, you'll stand a better chance of overcoming them quickly and comfortably.

The Connection between Hormones and Immunity

The glands responsible for hormone production and the mechanisms of the immune system use many of the same chemical messengers to relay messages. In turn, when one of these major systems is disrupted, the other will feel some of the effects.

Menstruation, perimenopause and menopause are dictated and controlled by hormones. Estrogen and progesterone fluctuations are normal aspects of a woman's cycle, but once you enter menopause, both of these important hormones decrease considerably, and permanently. At this time of hormonal shift, it's quite common for your immune system to begin responding differently, and that could mean the onset or worsening of allergies.

Not all allergies will worsen, and it can be difficult to predict how each woman will experience the hormonally charged immune response. However, there are a few common allergic reactions to watch out for during menopause:

- Hay fever (sneezing, runny nose and itchy eyes are the main symptoms)
- Asthma (allergic asthma causes inflammation in the airways)
- Dermatitis (eczema, rashes or hives are common complaints)

How Menopause May Encourage Allergies

It's difficult to know exactly what is to blame, but there are a few theories surrounding menopausal allergy triggers. Experts suspect that the issue begins with a shuffling of responsibilities among the hormonal centers of the body, and this gives way to some specific patterns of symptoms:

- **Adrenal fatigue.** Once the ovaries stop producing adequate amounts of hormones, the burden falls to the adrenal glands. Although they can keep producing estrogen, progesterone and testosterone for your body, the increased stress will eventually deplete the adrenal system, leaving you prone to fatigue and anxiety, but also more sensitive to your environment. In turn, you may develop seasonal allergies seemingly out of the blue, or else suffer through longer bouts of itching, sneezing and sniffling.

- **Sensitivity to toxins.** As your body becomes more sensitive to allergens and chemicals, you may begin to react to toxins that never gave you much of a problem before. Some common culprits are paint, household cleaning solutions, dust, and molds – many everyday irritants that you could easily inhale. A recent study indicated that women in perimenopause experience an 80% increase in asthma symptoms compared with women who continue to menstruate regularly, so you must take care to avoid respiratory triggers when you enter menopause.
- **Food intolerance.** Many people live with food sensitivities for years before they become severe enough to really take notice. Some women entering menopause find they can no longer enjoy foods containing eggs, dairy, wheat, soy or sulphites without an uncomfortable reaction. Common mild symptoms might include hives or stomach upset, but severe reactions like difficulty breathing or allergic shock could also occur.Additives, stabilizers and artificial flavors or fragrances are responsible for a good deal of discomfort, but it can be very difficult to avoid them without paying close attention. Get in the habit of reading packages closely, and try to cook more with whole foods that you know your system can handle well.

Next page: treating allergies in menopause.

Treating Allergies in Menopause

Naturally, you'll want to begin with treatments that are minimally invasive and come with a low risk of side effects in order to avoid more discomfort. Luckily, there are plenty of ways to gain an advantage over your allergies, and most are fairly simple and cheap:

- **Clean your air.** There are several pharmaceutical solutions for seasonal allergy symptoms, but if you can eliminate airborne allergies, you can avoid the initial histamine reaction altogether. Keep your windows closed when pollen levels are high, and invest in an air filter for your home. Several species of house plants are known to help clear the air, too: peace lilies, dracaena, bamboo palm and pothos are very good at eliminating toxic compounds like formaldehyde and benzene that are found in carpet, paint and cleaning solutions.
- **Ease skin irritation naturally.** If your skin has become more sensitive and easily irritated, look to your kitchen cupboard for some safe and simple ways to calm the itch, burn or inflammation. Olive oil is an amazing moisturizer, as is coconut oil – they seep into the skin for long-lasting hydration, and can calm itch and irritation.Oatmeal contains helpful compounds called avenanthramides that diminish irritation and redness, and it's been used to treat dry skin for generations. You could make an oatmeal paste to spread on your inflamed skin, or else sprinkle dry oats in the tub and soak your whole body for 15 or 20 minutes.

- **Consider hormone replacement therapy**. There are certainly pros and cons to hormone replacement therapy, but if you suffer from asthma or severe allergy symptoms, it might be your best bet for better health. Temporary hormone replacement, designed to be tapered off slowly, can help your hormones stabilize enough to curb the inflammatory response in your airways. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages with your doctor before making up your mind – it's helpful having a professional opinion when you're navigating HRT facts and risks.Stress is an important (though often overlooked) allergy trigger, so do what you can to limit the stress sin your life. Your body is going through enough turmoil during perimenopause and into menopause, and how you choose to spend your time, adjust your attitude, and handle challenges can play a big role in limiting or accentuating the stress sin your life. Take time to feed your spirit and body well, and try to stay focused on the positive aspects of menopause – freedom, self-awareness, and the chance for a new beginning – to distract help you deal with the drawbacks.