

Menopause

confused with HIV & Aids

UNAM study recommends better information on menopause

Based on the article "Menopause diagnosed incorrectly as HIV/AIDS" by Wezi Tjaronda, New Era, 1 February 2010

What is menopause?

Menopause is a natural change in a woman's life. Because her fertility hormones are decreasing with age, she one day no longer produces fertile ova (eggs) in her ovaries and will thus stop menstruating. Common symptoms of menopause include hot flushes, tiredness and mood swings.

Silence on the one hand and a hype and fuss about it on the other have mystified the whole process. Many people have a hazy idea of menopause and even confuse HIV-related symptoms with menopausal symptoms which can result in wrong actions. For this reason a study was conducted in 2008 by the University of Namibia's Multi-Disciplinary Research Centre among 1 502 respondents in nine regions of Namibia.

The aim of the study was to assess women's understanding of menopause, to find out which type information women receive about menopause, to examine how they cope with it and to ascertain whether there are traditional ways of passing on information from one generation to the next. The study was initiated by the Namibia National Women's Organisation (NANAWO) and funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Wrong diagnosis

The study found that there is a general lack of knowledge about menopause and its symptoms, which leads some people to diagnose menopausal symptoms as symptoms of HIV/AIDS. For example, 66 respondents in the Kavango, Omusati,

and Oshana regions confused most menopausal symptoms with those of HIV/AIDS. Of the 16 most common menopausal symptoms, the only symptoms that respondents related to menopause were hot flushes, less interest in sex and changes in sexual responses.

Who is seeking help?

The study found that all German, English and Afrikaner women respondents seek health services to deal with menopausal problems. However, the majority of Namibian women (81%) rather rely on social networks and traditional ways of passing on information on menopause from one generation to the next. The study found that 47% of Namibian women have received information from their mothers, while 24 % rely on information from

traditional healers. However, while the majority of women do not use health facilities as sources of information about

menopause, traditional remedies seem to have faded away, with only 29% of the respondents using traditional medicines such as herbs.

The report also explains that the majority of women do not seek help, because they do not view symptoms of

menopause as a problem. 65 percent of

women, the majority with lower education levels, do not use any strategy to cope with menopausal symptoms.

The researchers recommend that information on menopause is made available to all women of childbearing age and their partners, and that it should be integrated into existing health service training programmes. ♀

"The majority of Namibian women rely on traditional ways of passing on information on menopause."



**SMS
your
views!!!**

There is very little information about menopause for African and Namibian women. We would love to hear your experiences and stories on menopause. Please SMS them to 0814 629 639 or email us at sheena@sisternamibia.org

Dealing with menopause – Go with the flow

‘Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Do not resist them’. (Lau Tzu)

by Yasmin Agnew

For many women the cessation of menstruation is a source of relief: No more period pains and premenstrual tension, no more tampons or squishy pads, no more worries about becoming pregnant! However, the diminishing level of the hormone oestrogen also leads to symptoms that are often experienced as very negative.

What are these symptoms?

Hot flushes

Hot flushes during the day and night sweats are some of the most common symptoms of menopause. Any woman, who has had one, will recognise the sudden wave of heat that passes over her neck and face - accompanied by an increased pulse rate, a pounding heart and followed by a cascade of sweat!

Feelings

Many women also suffer from anxiety, mood swings, irritability, memory lapses, depression, tiredness and sudden loss of confidence.

Loss of interest in sex (libido)

Menopausal women often report a loss of libido, often in addition to loss of elasticity and thinning of the vaginal and vulva membranes, which also

become prone to dryness, itching and inflammation. Breasts might also become more tender and lose elasticity.

Hair loss

Hair loss or thinning of both pubic and head hair has been reported, yet an increase in facial hair has also been found. Some HIV/AIDS sufferers have reported hair loss and itchy skin which could possibly have led to the confusion between menopause and HIV/AIDS.

Aches and changes

Women have reported sore and aching muscles, tendons and joints, and a few older women have been found to develop osteoporosis (a bone disease). There have even been reports of tinnitus (ringing of the ears), dizziness and loss of balance, and a sudden change in weight. A decrease in weight could also be mistaken as a symptom of HIV/AIDS.

What helps?

Some menopausal symptoms could also be experienced with other medical conditions, so it is very important to seek advice from your doctor or nurse.

The most common medical treatment in Western countries involves the taking of the **hormone oestrogen** in the form of pills, skin patches, gels or injections. Although it has alleviated menopausal symptoms in many women, it increases the risks of heart disease, strokes and breast cancer in some users. **Plant extracts** in the form of pills and lotions are also prescribed to ease both physical and psychological symptoms of menopause.

However, don't forget the fountain of wisdom to be found among the aunties and grannies around you – after all, menopause has been with us since the beginning of time.

Many of our elders think that answers are not to be found in chemical remedies but rather in adapting to life changes – not to resist them, but to go with the flow, for example by...

- keeping something cool to drink close by to reduce the number of hot flushes and avoiding their ‘triggers’ such as alcohol, coffee, spicy food, stressful situations or smoking
- finding space in your day to indulge in relaxation like deep breathing or a 10 minute power nap
- seeking counselling for handling depression or anxiety
- talking and laughing with other women about your experiences and sharing advice.

Menopause is as inevitable as night following day. You can allow it to make you miserable or you can regard it as just another phase in your life. You choose! ♀

