

Menopause?

Fed up with constantly asking: is it me, or is it hot in here? Michelle Hather set out to discover if a more holistic approach could be the answer to her hot-flush hell. Read on to discover the surprising results...

For some time now, my body has been complaining. My joints ache, I can't sleep and – most embarrassingly – I have hot flushes that make me look like I've just completed a 10-mile run (I haven't). Sound familiar? Then you, too, are probably menopausal.

In my case, breast cancer treatment threw me abruptly into menopause two years ago when I was 47. At this age, many women will only begin experiencing the perimenopause – the run-up to the end of periods when oestrogen levels fall, causing the ovaries to stop producing eggs – although it's possible for the process to begin earlier and last up to a decade. Meanwhile, other women simply breeze through the experience.

For me, though, it's been a bumpy ride. So wouldn't it be great if we could treat this stage in our lives as a wake-up call; an opportunity for reinvention and focusing on living well? With that in mind, I want to see how one month of changing my eating habits, upping the exercise and introducing a period of daily relaxation will help me do battle with these menopausal symptoms without resorting to medication. But to do it I'll need to call in the experts. It's time for 30 days of menopausal bootcamp!



Yoga

Teacher Moira Clark (moiraclarkyoga.com) puts me through my paces, saying: 'If you could only do one yoga posture to get you through the menopause then it would be Sun Salutation. It massages your internal organs and improves circulation while keeping you flexible.'

I reach up high then touch the floor, shooting my legs backwards until I'm on all fours, then it's the Downward Facing Dog before I lower myself to the ground, bring my feet to meet my hands and stand up again. Moira takes me through Warrior Pose, Cobra, Shoulder Stand and an interesting rocking motion designed to expel wind! I am hooked.

'I've been teaching women for more than 30 years and none of my clients have needed hormone replacement,' says Moira. 'Yoga helps by reducing stress, keeping you lean and flexible, enhancing your mood and improving bone strength.'

As I twist and stretch and breathe deeply, I can feel blood whooshing around my body. When the session ends I feel happy and relaxed – and my irritable joints don't even grumble.

'If you're going through the menopause it helps to find a teacher who has gone through it herself. Make sure you're learning a form of flow yoga and do it at least once a week, preferably twice,' advises Moira.



How I showed it who's boss

Diet

Dietitian Laura Clark's first bit of advice is music to my ears – I should be eating more carbs. 'This is a time to nourish yourself and go back to basics, especially if you've had years of faddy diets,' she says. She asks me to describe a typical day: Special K for breakfast, boiled eggs or soup for lunch (no bread) and then an admittedly massive evening meal at around 8.30pm – sometimes with wine.

'The body needs carbs to fuel it and resisting these for large parts of the day usually results in snacking on sugary food,' says Laura (lecnutrition.co.uk). 'Falling oestrogen levels make us more sensitive to insulin, so spacing your carbohydrates out evenly over the day generally helps to regulate your sugar levels more efficiently,' she explains.

'Other important nutrients during menopause include foods to raise heart-protective HDL (good) cholesterol – which is lowered now because of falling oestrogen levels – calcium, protein and vitamin D to guard against declining bone mass and antioxidants that will generally improve your mood and wellbeing.'

Laura sets me a meal plan: wholegrain cereal or porridge for breakfast, two slices of wholegrain bread with monounsaturated spread, small amount of protein and a big salad for lunch, and dinner should include twice as many vegetables as carbs or protein. I'm told to eat more lean chicken and oily fish, continue having semi-skimmed milk with my breakfast and load up on deeply coloured fruit and veg. I must eat every three to four hours and have my evening meal earlier to evenly space my calorie intake.

I have new clients who tell me they have put weight on because their metabolism has slowed down – I tell them it hasn't. Once you are over 60 your energy requirements will drop by around 100 calories a day, but up until then your metabolism is not reduced,' says Laura. 'To a certain extent it's self-fulfilling – people are less vigilant about how many glasses of wine or puddings they have because they think it won't make a difference.'

Hypnotism

We can all think ourselves into a better place, according to hypnotist Caroline Carr. And for me and my horrible hot flushes, that place is a peaceful garden with ice-cold water. 'Hypnosis plants suggestions that go straight to the subconscious, such as feeling you can get to a place with a lovely, cooling waterfall. You can feel the water on your wrists and help yourself through that hot flush,' she says.

'When a woman who may be menopausal comes to me I always look at her problem holistically. Very often it's a time when children are needing lots of attention or fleeing the nest, there may be older relatives to take care of and perhaps there are job and money worries, too. Suddenly there is this huge hormonal thwack! And these physical changes fuel mental and emotional problems as well. Hypnosis can teach you how to relax and process any unresolved past issues.'

Caroline talks softly, counting to 10, then conjuring up images of tranquil gardens and trickling waterfalls. What follows is the most intense feeling of relaxation. My eyelids feel impossibly heavy. I walk through the garden, which she calls my basement of relaxation, and I can hear her telling me I will feel re-energised, with a deep feeling of wellbeing. Then she counts backwards and tells me to open my eyes. I can hardly bear to. Later I receive a CD that will take me to my garden every time I listen to it.

'Give yourself some time each day and you should soon be able to self hypnotise. This will help you relax, especially at night when you have difficulty sleeping,' says Caroline, who has more advice on her website, lettingthesunshinein.com.

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Acupuncture

Acupuncture is usually associated with tiny needles said to help the body heal itself by adjusting its chi, or flow of energy. But when I meet Mina Haeri (minahaeriacupuncture.co.uk) she makes me stick out my tongue. She says its pale colour and redder tip are typical of someone experiencing sleepless nights. It also has slightly scalloped edges caused by swelling and rubbing against my teeth. This points, she says, to a build-up of fluid that could account for the achy joints and lack of energy.

'I can also tell by taking your pulses which meridian needs strengthening – in your case we must strengthen the spleen meridian,' says Mina.

She takes a full medical history and then begins the treatment. I can feel the tiny scratch of needles and once or twice a line of heat shoots along my body. I can definitely feel a rush of... something.

'In the West, we don't have a model of medicine that involves energy, but that doesn't make it less true,' says Mina. 'Acupuncture is not magic – it's an incredibly sophisticated system with a complex model of understanding.'

I leave the surgery feeling more energetic and, for the first time in weeks, I have a blissful night's sleep.

The verdict

I feel better! It's been tough to focus so much on myself – work, children and a chaotic home life usually come first – but I've managed one or two yoga sessions a week, my diet has changed and I've relaxed with daily self-hypnosis and several acupuncture sessions. I'm hoping that if I stick to the plan there will be further improvements, but for now I'm sleeping more easily, feeling less achy and the flushes have all but stopped.

So which treatment helped me through the menopause assault course? The truth is, each probably played its part. But most importantly, I feel that I've taken control of my body's natural shift and I'm ready to see what's round the corner... □