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**SINGAPORE**

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Securing A Healthy Future –

# Preparing For Menopause

And Beyond

*I*nvesting for the future is a familiar concept. We learn in childhood that we need to study in order to pass our exams. We have to work hard for a pay raise or promotion. We commit time and energy to keep our family ties strong and social support firm. It is a recurring theme – we reap what we sow. It is important to realise that like everything else, we also need to put effort into our health. To build a strong and fit body throughout one's life and prepare for menopause is to invest in our own healthy future!

Many women approach menopause with dread and fear as

they associate menopause with the beginning of aging, loss of femininity and deterioration in health. But menopause is not an illness or a disease. It is a natural transition into a new phase of life and every woman will experience this at some point in life.

#### **When Does Menopause Occur?**

Most women want to know how best to prepare for menopause and the options they have to help cope with symptoms. They also want to know what long term health issues



Medically, the body does not just “fall apart” with menopause as some women believe. What we have done for and to our bodies will inevitably manifest as the years pass. For example, if we are not conscientious about healthy dietary choices and lose discipline in regular exercises, we may be at risk of diabetes and hypertension by midlife. If we smoked, there will be risk of a variety of cancers beyond the 40s. These are progressive medical problems that are not related to menopause.

### **Changes To Our Body**

With menopause, there is a decline in female hormones, estrogen and progesterone. This decline may initially be erratic. Most symptoms occur while it is erratic and the body takes awhile to adjust to the lower levels of hormones. Some women would be able to draw parallel to this “mal-adjustment” when their systems wreck havoc during the first trimester of pregnancy, or in the immediate postnatal period.

There are many options which are available to relieve symptoms. These range from lifestyle modification to herbal remedies to hormone replacement. As women approach menopause, they should look out for disruptive symptoms and consult their doctors to assess them individually to find the safest, most acceptable remedy or medication to help them ease any discomfort faced during the transition and improve their quality of life.

After menopause, there are two main health issues related to the decline in estrogen. Firstly, the protective effect of estrogen on cholesterol metabolism and therefore leading to the decline of the heart health. Secondly, bone building metabolism will decelerate resulting in more bone loss and increased risk of osteoporosis.

As highlighted previously, these are conditions which develop if we have not looked after these aspects

of health all our lives. To prevent high cholesterol, narrowing of blood vessels and heart disease, attention to eating a moderate low fat diet and regular exercise should start from young. To prevent osteoporosis, taking sufficient calcium in the diet, staying active and having regular exercises are of great importance.

### **Years After Menopause**

Women facing difficulties through their perimenopausal years should not stand alone. Hopefully, they have fostered good relationships with those around them for support and understanding.

It is important to have channels of help available for those who face difficulties. Trained counsellors are available for advice through the Woman To Woman Menopause Support Group hotline and activities are organised for women around the ages of menopause and beyond. These women are able to share their experiences and discuss their problems with one another.

Menopause can bring about wonderful changes or conveniences. The cessation of menstrual periods is a welcoming change as there is less hygiene and blood loss issues to deal with. The reducing hormonal stimulation causes existing gynaecological conditions like fibroids and endometriosis to resolve. There is no longer worry of unplanned pregnancy.

Understanding of menopause relieves anxiety and removes fear. When we are armed with knowledge, we are able to manage our health and wellness as we enter menopause and the many years following. Indeed, when we have invested in a healthy future, we are able to celebrate menopause! ■

*Dr Chua Yang is the Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist and Director of A Clinic For Women. She is also the President of the Menopause Research Society (Singapore).*

they should take note of following menopause and how best to maintain good health and wellness. In other words, most women want to invest in a healthy future.

In a local survey done in 2004, 300 women aged between 40 and 55 were interviewed. The majority of these women knew about menopause and cited common symptoms like hot flushes, headaches, tiredness, irritability and mood swings as those associated with the event. However, only 22% of these women consulted their doctors to find out more about menopause and a staggering 64% claimed they did not prepare for menopause or the health issues that may follow.

### **Planning Ahead**

We need to encourage all women to seek information. If they are armed with accurate knowledge a decade or two before the actual transition period of menopause, I suspect many will face menopause with more ease.

Formed in 1998, the Menopause Research Society (Singapore) (MRSS) aims to promote research and understanding of the biological phenomenon of menopause, and to conduct educational activities in this respect. *MillionaireAsia's* Joann Chia speaks with Dr Chua Yang (CY), President of MRSS, Dr Yu Su Ling (YSL), MRSS spokesperson, and Dincy Lim (DL), President of the Woman to Woman Menopause Support Group.

## The Faces Behind Menopause Management



From left: Dr Chua Yang – President of MRSS, Dincy Lim – President of the Woman to Woman Menopause Support Group & Dr Yu Su Ling – MRSS spokesperson

### Why was the MRSS formed?

**YSL:** 10 years ago, we realised that there was a lack of data among Asian women, and so, after some encouragement, we decided to register the society and bring together a small group of doctors who are interested in the management of menopause.

### What exactly does the MRSS do?

**CY:** The society helps to train and bring awareness about menopause management to doctors and specialists through dissemination of international findings, national congresses and continual medical education programmes. We seek to spread the word to local doctors to help them understand and assist their patients who are going through the menopause transition. We also hope to trigger interest in the local medical community to conduct research.

**YSL:** We're working quite closely with our counterparts in neighbouring countries in research and we are also affiliated with the Asia Pacific Menopause Federation as well as the International Menopausal Society. Our interests are to help patients prepare for menopause and the years ahead beyond menopause.

### So the society is mainly made up of doctors and gynaecologists?

**CY:** Yes, mostly. But we also work with anyone who is interested in menopause management, which is why many of our activities are on a voluntary basis. MRSS is a non-profit society. Apart from working with our medical colleagues, we also strive to connect with women from all walks of life directly through public forums, health awareness programmes and we provide medical advice to the Woman to Woman Menopause Support on an ad-hoc basis.

### Tell us more about the Woman to Woman Menopause Support Group.

**DL:** This group provides a platform for women to discuss the myths and fears of menopause and to share with each other their personal experience through the transition. We aim to provide comprehensive and

accurate information on menopause to women, something which was lacking in Singapore 12 years ago. Back then, most women were not open to talking about menopause. We wanted people to be open about it and share their experiences and so, we launched a hotline for the public to call through. It was easier to talk to a voice rather than talk to a doctor in person. Since we started our menopause support group, we've been having monthly gatherings where we can talk to women about menopause and share our knowledge about it. In the past, we focused on the older women who were already experiencing menopause. We weren't interested in younger women at all. But today, we're interested in a much broader age range because there are so many young women who want to know what will be happening to them in the future and they want to be prepared for it.

### What do you think are the biggest challenges in spreading the message about menopause management?

**CY:** Creating awareness and making sure that people are getting accurate information. There is a lot of incorrect information out there, so the society wants to educate the public and make accurate information available. That includes motivating the public to get involved and be knowledgeable about menopause. There are always controversial issues about new treatments or what is best for each individual woman. We're concerned that women will shy away from viable choices that will help them manage their perimenopausal symptoms because of fear and inaccurate "hear-says"

**YSL:** There are many treatment options available. Some are "fashionable", some are not. The society's interest is to bring evidence to the public about what works and what doesn't. We want to correct the mistakes that people have heard from the news as well. We want to stay neutral about the information we provide them and help them to make an informed decision about their treatment plan.

### Does that mean that all women in the menopausal age group need some form of treatment?

**YSL:** No, in general, most women who are going through menopause do quite well and we do not need to worry about them. But there will be women who face menopause with much difficulty in terms of symptoms and we hope to be able to help them get some relief.

**CY:** In our local survey, we found that only about 20% of all women have moderate to severe symptoms of menopause. But if they have symptoms, they need to know that there are lifestyle modifications, herbal remedies as well as medical treatments available. In another survey, it was found that up to 70% of menopausal women felt that they were not adequately prepared for menopause. They simply do not know what to expect. So while there isn't much to worry about physically, we are trying to give women adequate information about what they should expect to go through.

### In conjunction with the World Menopause Day in October 2008, what are the plans in the pipelines by MRSS?

**CY:** We will be organising a public forum entitled "Securing A Healthy Future" and this is focused on raising menopause awareness and spreading the word that there are channels available for anyone who needs information.

**YSL:** It will be a holistic approach this year, with emphasis on better quality of life in every respect. As such, we will invite medical speakers not just from areas of menopause management, bone and cardiovascular health, but also from the fields of dentistry, dermatology and plastic surgery, as well as professionals from the wellness and lifestyle sector such as exercise or yoga instructors to join us for the forum.