

Menopause, Integrative Medicine, and You: Evidence for a Natural Approach to Women's
Health

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Abstract:

Around 2 million women are estimated to enter menopause each year in the U.S. ("Chapter 1: Overview of Menopause", 2010). While menopause is not a disease, there are a number of uncomfortable symptoms associated with it, including hot flashes, insomnia, depression, and sexual issues ("What Are the Signs", 2017). Some diseases are associated with it as well, such as heart disease and osteoporosis ("What is Menopause", 2017). Conventional medicine has recommended hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in the past, but multiple studies have shown that these therapies can be associated with elevated cancer risk (Collaborative Group on Hormonal Factors in Breast Cancer, 2019). In my private practice of acupuncture and Chinese medicine, I've had great results using custom made essential oil formulas to safely benefit patients with menopausal symptoms. Inspired to look at the research, I've found a number of studies showing different essential oils as well as acupuncture have been found to be effective for treating various symptoms of menopause or helping to resolve underlying hormonal issues. These include the use of vitex for hot flashes (Lucks B., 2003) and geranium for menopausal depression (Rafsanjani, et al., 2015). These essential oils are safe when used correctly (Tisserand, Young, & Williamson, 2014). I make recommendations for use, with the key point being that women work with trained experienced medical professionals for best results.

Keywords: Menopause, Women's Health, Essential Oils, Acupuncture, TCM

Menopause is a chapter every woman will come to in the story of her health. While it's different for every woman, how she experiences menopause and how she chooses to treat it will have lasting impacts on her health going forward. Conventional treatments carry well-established risks. In my clinical experience, essential oils and acupuncture have worked very well for menopausal symptoms. Inspired by this to look at the research, I see we've begun to have evidence that natural approaches to easing menopausal symptoms can be effective. They may be a good choice for women as they make each chapter of their story the best part so far.

Menopause is officially defined as beginning when a woman's period has been in cessation for at least 12 months ("What is Menopause", 2017) and there are estimated to be 45.6 million women going through the process of menopause in America ("Chapter 1: Overview of Menopause", 2010). Although a woman can check with her doctor for changes in hormones such as estrogen and FSH ("What is Menopause", 2017), for many women it's simply a matter of observing the changes in their menstrual cycle and the menopausal symptoms that surround it.

These symptoms vary, but most women will have some experience of them. They include the infamous hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, mood changes and depression, dryness and changes in sexual function ("What Are the Signs", 2017) that are well known for menopause and the time leading up to it. It's important to note here that menopause is not a disease, but rather a natural process. However, these symptoms can be uncomfortable and even life-changing. Menopause is also associated with some health issues, such as bone loss, that woman should be aware of ("What Are the Signs", 2017).

If the symptoms are severe, they can be related to other serious health issues. For example, researchers have found that severe night sweats are associated with increased risk of cognitive decline and that severe hot flashes are linked to increased risk of heart attack attacks and stroke (LaMotte, 2019). That should be enough to convince anyone to look to quell their symptoms and the hormonal imbalances behind them.

Doctors had been recommending hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to alleviate menopausal symptoms for years. As you may have heard, a careful study found that there were serious risks of breast cancer associated with HRT (Rossouw, J. E., et al, 2002). This was concerning enough, but now researchers have followed up and found that the risk of breast cancer is twice what was previously thought—this is because even after stopping HRT, increased risk of cancer can persist for 10 years afterwards (Collaborative Group on Hormonal Factors in Breast Cancer, 2019). I find that doctors are still prescribing HRT to my patients, but surely there are better and safer ways for women to find relief from menopausal symptoms.

I use acupuncture and essential oils in my clinical practice of Chinese medicine to treat a wide variety of conditions, including but not limited to many different kinds of pain, stress, allergies, and reproductive issues—including menopausal symptoms. In the 16 years I've been in practice, I've noticed that acupuncture and essential oils have been very effective for treating my patients going through menopause. I think my patients were sometimes surprised at how effective it is.

Let me walk you through a little of what I do. Chinese medicine focuses on treating the individual. That means that two people coming in with the same symptoms often receive a slightly different treatment to match differences in the causes of the issue and differences in each person's

strengths and weaknesses in healing that issue. Listening to the person and matching my medicine to their needs, I know I'll best be able to help.

With women coming with menopausal symptoms, I start by applying dilutions of essential oils over acupuncture points and then I follow up with acupuncture. Both the essential oils and the acupuncture points each have what I call their "personality"—unique sets of therapeutic functions. These functions have a broad range, some of them include: Harmonizing the central nervous system, relieving pain, resolving inflammation, boosting the immune system, improving circulation, digestion, and respiration, and balancing the reproductive system. For menopausal women, I'm choosing essential oils and acupoints that are calming, cooling, and balancing for the nervous, reproductive, and hormonal systems. After I treat a patient a few times and feel I've gotten to know their individual circumstances well, I'll make a custom essential oil dilution blend just for them to apply at home. I have a little anatomy chart I mark with a pen and show them where to apply the oil blend. Blends are applied in a cycle of four days on, three days off each week to give the body time to process the treatment.

I want to point out that I use these essential oils in dilution, that means using a carrier oil such as organic grapeseed oil, sweet almond oil, or even olive oil. It's important to know that while these natural medicines don't have the risks that hormone replacement therapy has, they can be potent and need to be used with care. Natural doesn't mean safe and more isn't always better. There's an excellent textbook on essential oil safety I'd recommend to anyone who wants to use them for more than diffusing in the air. It's called "Essential Oil Safety" by Robert Tisserand (Tisserand, Young, & Williamson, 2014).

So, what are those essential oils I'm using to such good effect? Well, I think the best way to answer that is to look at the research. I'm making custom formulas for each patient, but it turns out that the research is on many of the oils I use in practice. This research is just the beginning, but the results are interesting and significant. Many of these studies have a control group, which means we can start to have confidence that the beneficial effects are not merely due to a placebo effect. Keep in mind that for essential oils, all the effects in these studies are simply from smelling the oils, rather than application on the skin as I do in my clinic. When we apply oils on the skin, the clinical effect may be stronger, but there is a risk of having a rash if we aren't sure about both the oil and the patient, so smelling the oils is a gentle and good way to begin using them anyway.

The first oil we'll look at is chasteberry, which is also known under its scientific name, vitex. Vitex is a potent oil, and there's evidence it reduces both hot flashes and menopausal depression (Lucks B., 2003) . Another very useful essential oil is geranium. This oil has also been found to significantly help with menopausal depression (Rafsanjani, et al., 2015). This study actually used geranium oil in massage of menopausal women. The control group received the same massage with plain massage oil and the women receiving massage with the geranium had a much greater benefit.

Geranium essential oil has also been studied for its beneficial effect on estrogen levels, which drop with menopause. A study showed that either smelling geranium or rose essential oil each separately raised estrogen levels more than a placebo (Shinohara, Do, Kumaga, Sawano & Tarumi, 2016). The effect was small, but significant. It's a tantalizing piece of evidence giving insight into how essential oils can safely help with menopausal symptoms. I'd like to see this study repeated with application of dilutions of these oils on the skin.

Speaking of essential oils and hormone levels, there have been other studies showing beneficial effects. Smelling either jasmine, roman chamomile, or clary sage essential oils have all been found to increase testosterone levels in menopausal women versus a placebo (Tarumi, Kumaga, & Shinohara, Jan 2019). That's a good thing, women need testosterone, too. Clary sage has also been shown to have an anti-depressant effect, reducing the stress hormone cortisol and increasing levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin (Lee, K. B., Cho, E., & Kang, Y. S., 2014).

Here are two other studies showing essential oils to have benefits for women going through menopause: The first showed that menopausal women who used neroli, that's orange blossom, essential oil aromatherapy reported reduced stress and better measures of sexual wellness (Choi, S. Y., Kang, P., Lee, H. S., & Seol, G. H., 2014). The second showed evidence that pine oil may be protective against bone loss in menopause, with several common constituents in essential oils also having potential protective effects (Mühlbauer, Lozano, Palacio, Reinli, & Felix, 2003).

I'd also like to point out that there is research to show that acupuncture is effective for reducing hot flashes, and that this effect has been confirmed by several studies. In one representative study, acupuncture significantly reduced hot flashes, sweating, and insomnia versus a control (Lund, Siersma, Brodersen, & Waldorff, 2019)

How to make the most of this information for you and the women in your life who are going through menopause: As a medical professional, I'm going to recommend working with medical professionals. I recommend only receiving acupuncture from someone who has a master's degree in acupuncture, not a medical degree in something else doing acupuncture on the side. For essential oils, avoid multi-level marketers, their claims, and products. Work with someone whose training is not from the same company that is selling them essential oils, that's an obvious conflict

of interests. A good start to finding a clinician would be to look up the National Association of Holistic Aromatherapy. They have a listing of practitioners who have met their requirements for certification. If you're going to try to use essential oils on your own, stick to diffusing them in the air for no more than 30 minutes at any one time and talk to your primary care physician ahead of time. Trustworthy sources of high-quality essential oils include Originalswissaromatics.com, enfleurage.com, and sunrosearomatics.com.

In conclusion, going through menopause has its challenges, but you don't have to do it alone. Essential oils and acupuncture are safe and effective options backed by research. With a little learning and partnering with medical professionals you can trust, you'll keep your cool and make this journey with ease.

Short Bio: Christopher Dye, MS, Lic. Ac.

Christopher is a nationally board-certified and New York State licensed acupuncturist. Since 2004, Christopher has been taking of patients at his private practice in Manhattan in New York City. He received his Masters of Science in classical acupuncture and Chinese medicine at the Swedish Institute in NYC at a program founded by Jeffrey Yuen, 88th generation priest of the Jade Purity Sect of Taoism. Christopher continues his training with Jeffrey Yuen to this day. As part of his masters program, Christopher treated cancer patients with acupuncture at Cancer Support Network, an outpatient clinic affiliated with Sloan Kettering Memorial Cancer Center in New York City. He's in the doctoral program at Pacific College of Health and Science.

Christopher taught at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, designing the curriculum for the Classical Diagnostic and Clinical Skills course. He has also taught post-graduate classes at the New England School of Acupuncture—the oldest acupuncture school in the country. He's lectured at the New Age Health Spa, Dorot, and Gilda's Club, a center for cancer patients and their families.

Christopher was featured in two documentary films, "Crazy Sexy Cancer" and "The Miracle Herbs", and he's been interviewed on local television and radio.

Christopher graduated with a BA in psychology from Columbia University.

For more information, please visit ManhattanClassicalAcupuncture.com

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