

The Practical Herbalist -- Menopause

Traditional forms of medicine look at menopause as a natural transition in life. The question becomes not how to “fix” women at this stage of life but rather how to ease the transition. Most herbal traditions had some way of understanding of what foods and herbs would help. In China, menopause is seen as a condition described as yin deficiency empty heat, which means that the body is lacking the strength of fluids and cooling and so heat and dryness gets out of control. Herbs that nourish yin cooling and fluid functions were seen as a way to control the situation. In most cases those herbs were expensive and herbalists simply relied on soy which nourished yin function and was cheap and available.

The dynamics of menopause are complicated. The best analogy to explain the situation I have found is that of a factory. As we age, all functions decrease as our ability to fix and grow decreases. Energy once abundant in our youth, is now rationed and budgeted.

The reproductive system takes a lot of energy. In men the system is like a small job shop, as demand decreases, the system can just scale back in a relatively smooth manner. In women however the reproductive system is more like a large assembly line factory. It takes a lot of energy, workers, coordination to just get the system to run every month.

At some point the budget of age declining energy gets to the point where it is no longer feasible or necessary to “fire up” the factory this month. When the decision to shut down is made, many things have to change. Much like a one company town losing its factory after many years, chaos enters what was a very ordered system. The energy that was allocated to the reproductive system needs to be reallocated. Since there was not enough energy to manage the reproductive system, there is now not enough energy to manage the shifting dynamics and attempts to rebalance the system. Just like those one company towns, some handle the situation well and move on, others have a difficult time. When it does not go well, the shifting energy happens unevenly with energy (heat) flashing out of control and the system straining to cool greatly shifting levels of heat. This can lead to (like the towns folk) emotional instability and irritability, bursts of unfocused energy, and an end of the day exhaustion that is unsettled and draining (night sweats).

As with the small town, some of the chaos and disruption can be controlled with proper planning and the right tools. In the case of menopause, cooling nourishing foods (like fish and green vegetables and fruits) as well as avoiding hot dispersing foods and spices (hot spices, junk food, and stimulants) can make a difference and help the system rebalance. Books on traditional Chinese Food therapy will give more detailed lists of the types of foods and traditional herbal formulas that can relieve or eliminate symptoms during this time of life.

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