

Complementary Therapies and Menopausal Symptoms

Researchers review 29 studies of complementary and alternative medical (CAM) therapies for addressing common menopausal symptoms.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is widely used today for a variety of health conditions and concerns. In the U.S., only recently have researchers looked to test various therapies using the scientific models highly regarded by Western science.

Researchers recently reviewed the available randomized, controlled studies addressing the role of different CAM therapies in treating common menopausal symptoms like hot flashes, sleep problems, fatigue and joint pain. CAM therapies reviewed include herbal remedies, dietary supplements, foods with phytoestrogens like soy, acupuncture, and behavioral therapies. Among all of these categories, only 29 studies were identified and reviewed.

Researchers found that black cohosh and foods containing phytoestrogens show promise for treating menopausal symptoms, but to-date, none of the other clinical trials showed significant benefits.

Black cohosh is a popular herb used for menopausal hot flashes today. A member of the buttercup family, black cohosh has been used for centuries by Native Americans and in combination with other herbs for millennia in Traditional Chinese Medical formulas. Three of the four studies reviewed found the herb to be beneficial for helping alleviate hot flashes. The researchers emphasize that, while it may be useful in treating menopausal symptoms in the short term, long-term safety is not yet known.

Studies on other herbal products including red clover, dong quai, oil of evening primrose, ginseng and foods containing soy isoflavones did not show significant benefits or were inconclusive for alleviating menopausal symptoms. However, the number of studies reviewed is very small and more research needs to be done before full conclusions can be drawn.

This research provides an important early review of CAM therapies for menopausal symptoms. With only 29 studies on a wide variety of different therapies, it is challenging to provide sound recommendations yet. This is an important step toward scientific evaluation of CAM therapies and a call for further research. Long-term usage and safety studies are also on the horizon.

References:

Hu FB, Willett WC. (2002) Optimal Diets for Prevention of Coronary Heart Disease. *JAMA*, 288: 2569-2578.