“Women’s Health”
Leading a Healthy Lifestyle

SOMEONE has rightly said that, “The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world!” Since time immemorial, women have indeed been the pillar of strength for their families, being gentle and strong at the same time. Women have also contributed significantly towards the progress of our society and nation through their remarkable achievements in various fields. They have been bestowed with qualities like self-sacrifice, caring and giving and have shown great emotional strength in times of crisis.

Today, women not only continue with their traditional role of caring for their family but also venture out to work and support their families. Today’s woman has additional responsibilities both at home and at the workplace. Juggling between their careers and household duties, women are often hard-pressed for time. They have little or practically no time to focus on their health.

Women are beset with health problems specific to them. But with a little care, healthy food habits, and an active lifestyle women can overcome such problems to a great extent.

The stress of balancing life and work has taken a toll on women’s health. This has contributed significantly to an increasing number of women having health issues especially during their child-bearing years.

More women nowadays seem to be struggling with issues concerning
reproductive health due to various reasons. This not only affects the quality of their life but of their offspring too as a woman’s health has a direct impact on her children’s health. Menstrual problems have become quite common with teenage girls as well as women in their 20’s and 30’s.

The most significant phenomenon that occurs naturally during middle age in every woman’s life is menopause. It comes with a host of problems, if proper care is not taken during this period. Post-menopausal women have other health concerns as their risk for heart disease, osteoporosis and breast cancer increases. But life doesn’t pause after menopause. Post-menopausal women too can live life to the fullest by being active and eating a healthy diet right from an early age.

Menstrual Cycle and Women’s Health
During childbearing years (13-45 years), a regular menstrual cycle indicates good health. Menstrual irregularities are becoming quite common these days probably due to increased stress and faulty lifestyle practices.

There are two female hormones, namely, oestrogen and progesterone, which rise and fall during the menstrual cycle of 28 days. Menstrual problems stem usually from the imbalances of these hormones in the body. This may result in heavy bleeding during menstruation (the monthly periods which occur due to shedding of the uterus lining) or long lasting periods known as menorrhagia, absence of menstruation or periods known as amenorrhoea (often seen in athletes due to vigorous physical activity or in anorexics due to poor intake of food resulting in nutrient deficiencies) or painful periods known as dysmenorrhoea.

Abdominal cramps may occur during menstrual bleeding due to the release of a hormone-like substance called prostaglandin. Usually the cramps last for a day or two during periods but sometimes they may last longer and be so intense that normal daily activities may get disrupted.

In women during their 20s, 30s and 40s, painful periods may result due to conditions like fibroids and endometriosis. Fibroids are lumps or tumors (non-cancerous) which grow within the wall of the uterus. Endometriosis is a condition in which uterus-like tissue grows outside the uterus. Fibroids and endometriosis may affect a woman’s reproductive health adversely. Fibroids can result in premature birth and endometriosis can interfere with a woman’s ability to conceive and is a common cause for infertility in females.

Iron deficiency anaemia is common in women who have heavy menstrual bleeding. They must consult a doctor before taking iron supplements and should include iron-rich foods in the diet regularly to prevent anaemia. Iron is best absorbed from animal foods like fish, mutton, chicken and egg. Liver is the richest source of iron. Iron from vegetarian sources like leafy greens (spinach, fenugreek, etc.) is poorly absorbed but when vitamin C rich foods (citrus fruits like lime, orange, lemon, amla, tomatoes) are included along with iron-containing foods, iron from vegetarian sources becomes easily available to the body.

Sometimes irregularity in menstrual cycle may indicate some underlying disease condition which may require medical help. Hence, one must seek professional advice when menstrual problems occur or any change in menstrual cycle takes place.

PCOS or Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome: It is a disorder affecting women especially young girls in their teens and 20’s. It is becoming more common these days due to faulty food habits and lifestyle practices.

It is actually a lifestyle-related disorder which results due to hormonal disturbances in the body. It develops due to formation of multiple cysts in the ovaries. An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled sac in the ovary. In PCOS, multiple cysts develop which interfere with the normal ovulation process (release of ovum or egg from ovary every month). The primary reason for this is release of male hormone androgens in excess amounts. Women too produce androgens from ovaries but when it occurs in excess, it interferes with the ovulation process.

Women with PCOS usually have the following symptoms:
1. Irregular, absent or infrequent periods
2. Obesity or weight gain
3. Thinning of hair or male-like pattern of balding
4. Excess of hair growth on chest, face, stomach, thumbs and toes
5. Infertility or trouble getting pregnant
6. Acne

Women with PCOS are not only susceptible to infertility problems but are at a greater risk of getting other health problems too like Type-2 diabetes, heart disease, high BP, metabolic syndrome, fibroids and depression. Such women
have high levels of insulin in their body which probably increases their risk for getting diabetes at a later stage.

Taking medications to treat PCOS is not enough. Being a lifestyle related disorder, it requires one to change lifestyle and food habits too. Losing weight if overweight or obese, being physically active and eating a healthy diet comprising of fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grain products and less of refined foods, limiting fat, sugar and salt in the foods helps in treating PCOS better.

Premenstrual Syndrome or PMS:
Premenstrual syndrome is a collection of symptoms which usually occur a week or two before menstruation (monthly periods) begins. The symptoms generally subside as one starts menstruating. PMS can affect menstruating women of any age but is more common in the late 20’s and early 40’s. The symptoms vary from individual to individual and may range from mild to severe.

Mild forms of PMS may not bother much but severe PMS may adversely affect a woman’s daily activities. Changes in the hormonal levels which occur during the latter part of the menstrual cycle may result in PMS. Chemical changes in the brain may also be responsible. Stress, emotional upheavals and depression may not cause PMS but worsen the symptoms. Sometimes thyroid disorder may also mimic PMS.

Hence, if PMS is affecting your life significantly, see a doctor to find out if other medical conditions are also involved.

The symptoms of PMS may vary widely and may include both emotional and physical changes, which are as follows:
1. Feeling tired and fatigued
2. Feeling bloated or full
3. Breast tenderness or swelling and pain
4. Swelling in parts of the body like chest, hips, thighs and abdomen region; this occurs due to fluid retention and this weight gain is temporary which gets relieved as menstrual bleeding begins
5. Upset stomach, diarrhea or constipation just before menses
6. Lower back ache, headache, muscle and joint pain
7. Appetite changes or food cravings
8. Trouble concentrating or memorizing
9. Irritability, anger
10. Mood swings, crying spells
11. Anxiety, depression, troubled sleep
12. Acne

Relieving PMS
PMS occurs due to low levels of vitamins and minerals in the body. Low calcium and magnesium levels tend to trigger PMS. Hence, foods rich in sources of calcium such as dairy products, fish, fortified soy beverages, green leafy vegetables like spinach, black sesame or til seeds must be included in the daily diet.

Calcium is best absorbed from animal sources as compared to vegetarian sources. Magnesium-rich foods include pulses, nuts and legumes. Certain symptoms of PMS get relieved on including these minerals in adequate amounts in the diet. Cramping, bloating and mood changes are reduced due to calcium inclusion in the diet. Depression and headaches may be relieved by inclusion of magnesium in the diet.

Have foods with low GI (glycemic index) as foods with low GI raise blood sugars more slowly as compared to high GI foods. Whole grains must replace refined cereals made out of white flour (maida), semolina, etc. Whole grain products like broken wheat porridge, whole wheat flour, whole wheat bread, wheat bran or bran-containing foods are better as they raise blood sugar slowly leading to lesser food cravings or hunger pangs. They also help in increasing the production of a brain chemical, serotonin, which regulates mood.

Foods that are known to worsen symptoms of PMS must be avoided. They include alcohol, caffeine and highly salted or processed foods. Alcohol can act as a trigger or worsen the symptoms, hence, must be avoided before menstrual periods begin. Caffeinated beverages such as tea, coffee or cola drinks must be avoided to prevent PMS.

Highly refined foods and salt intake also disturb hormonal balance. Salt when taken in excess can cause fluid retention leading to swelling or bloating sensation.
in the body parts. Reducing salt or sodium intake can help relieve bloating.

Soyabean or soy and its products like soymilk, tofu (soya paneer), soya granules and chunks (textured vegetable protein), soya flour or soyabean atta can be incorporated in the diet on a regular basis as soy is known to relieve menopausal symptoms like hot flashes. Soyabean contains phytoestrogens called isoflavones, mainly daidzein and genistein. These isoflavones have a mild oestrogen-like activity in the body which helps to relieve menopausal symptoms and also reduces the risk of osteoporosis and heart disease in women who consume soy products regularly.

Soybean is an excellent source of protein of good quality comparable to animal protein. Soy also reduces the risk for certain types of cancer like breast cancer. Research on the efficacy of soy isoflavone supplements is still inconclusive and, hence, supplemental form of soy must be avoided. It is best to include soy in moderation when breast cancer has already been detected.

Whole soy foods such as soy flour can be added to regular wheat flour or atta for preparing chapattis, soy chunks and granules can be added to gravy dishes or vegetables. Tofu or soya paneer can be included in the diet as it is low in fat and cholesterol-free as compared to paneer prepared from whole milk.

Exercise or stay physically active to prevent PMS. Women who are active or exercise regularly experience less PMS as compared to women who are sedentary or who stay indoors most of the time. Exercise raises levels of endorphins, which are natural mood elevators, in the brain. This helps prevent depression and improves one’s sense of well-being and can be a great stress-buster too. Exercise also helps in re-distributing body fluids which helps alleviate bloating resulting due to fluid retention.

**Menopause: Time to Pause and Ponder**

Menopause is a natural phenomenon that occurs in every woman’s life at around the age of 45-50 years. It is a phase when ovaries stop releasing eggs and is marked by complete cessation of menstrual periods. The hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which the ovary produces during a normal menstrual cycle, are no longer produced.

Menopause is not a disorder but maybe accompanied by symptoms that may cause discomfort and affect the normal life of a woman. With the declining levels of oestrogen and progesterone hormones, menopausal symptoms begin to appear in women in the form of hot flashes, night sweats, irritability, mood swings, menstrual irregularities and vaginal dryness. Other symptoms may include insomnia and depression alongwith weight gain.

Menopause can affect the life expectancy and the quality of life of a woman as it usually increases the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis in women. The hormone estrogen is known to protect women from heart disease and osteoporosis but after menopause, oestrogen is no longer produced by ovaries. Hence, post menopausal women do not get the protection anymore and are at an equal risk of getting heart disease as men.

Declining levels of oestrogen hormone with the advent of menopause also accelerate loss of bone mass and density increasing the risk for osteoporosis. Osteoporosis further increases the risk of fall fractures which may lead to pain and disability. Bone loss which occurs in post-menopausal women is partly due to lack of oestrogen and partly because of reduced absorption of calcium with age.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or estrogen replacement therapy has been used by many women to relieve symptoms of menopause and to reduce the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis. However, major studies done on the effect of HRT have shown that with the long-term use of HRT, the risk for breast cancer, heart disease, stroke and blood clotting increases in post menopausal women.
without any side effects. Far the best possible options available and dietary approaches seem to be by benefits of taking HRT, lifestyle changes women. Since, the risks outweigh the process and is inevitable. 

Osteoporosis after Menopause
Our bones undergo a constant remodeling process throughout life with the old bone cells being broken down and resorbed and replaced with new bone cells. When calcium resorption exceeds calcium deposition, which facilitates bone formation, the bones become weak and porous.

Bone mass and density building occur mainly during the critical growth period of adolescence. Peak bone mass is reached during the 20s and thereafter gradual decline in bone mass begins from age 30 onwards. This loss of bone mass occurs as a part of the natural ageing process and is inevitable.

But after menopause, decline in bone mass is greatly accelerated due to loss of oestrogen production. When ovaries stop producing oestrogen hormone at the time of menopause, the risk of osteoporosis in women is considerably increased as oestrogen helps in reducing the loss of bone mass. Hence, many women resort to HRT to protect them from osteoporosis.

Early menopause increases the risk of severe osteoporosis. If ovaries are removed surgically before menopause, women experience a sudden cessation of estrogen production which may cause osteoporosis more severe than in those whose ovaries are intact and approach menopause as a natural process.

Osteoporosis may greatly increase the risk of fractures during a fall or injury and may even affect a woman’s life expectancy and quality of life. Severe backache, fractures in wrist, hip or ankle with minor accidents, and a stooping posture in women as they age may also indicate weak bones. A bone density scan done timely can save one from fractures and the discomfort caused due to them. Women who have menstrual irregularities must consult a doctor and get a bone density scan done.

The doctor may recommend calcium and vitamin D supplements if required. Other strategies to minimize the risk of osteoporosis include diet and lifestyle changes. Including calcium-rich foods in the diet along with vitamin D helps in preserving bone mass. Vitamin D is essential for facilitating calcium absorption in the bones.

Calcium-rich foods include low-fat dairy products like milk, curd, cottage cheese or paneer. Other non-dairy sources include green leafy vegetables like spinach, sesame or til seeds, particularly black til. Calcium is best absorbed from animal sources such as bones of fish, milk and milk products. The best source of vitamin D is 10-15 minutes exposure to sunlight early in the morning. Dietary sources include butter, egg yolk and milk.

In an average Indian household, it is common to see women spending a lot of time in the kitchen preparing delicacies. This leaves them so exhausted, that women hardly have any energy left for exercise or outdoor activities to boost health and stamina. This practice usually leads to poor health in women who suffer greatly by the time they reach middle age.

Women who stay mostly indoors and have little exposure to sunlight tend to have weaker bones as compared to women who work outdoors and are physically active. Hence, women must be encouraged to spend time in outdoor activities and engage in weight-bearing exercises like walking, lifting objects (light weight) like groceries, climbing stairs, dancing, etc. Weight-bearing activities help in building stronger bones.

Girls too should be encouraged to have calcium-rich foods like milk, right from childhood. They must also engage in activities like dancing, cycling, walking and stay physically active throughout life to build healthy and strong bones. Physical activity not only helps in building stronger bones but also improves blood circulation which is of paramount importance especially for overall good health and general well-being.

Women need to take charge of their health as it determines the quality of life in old age. Being aware of your body’s needs, making an effort to obtain good nutrition and leading an active lifestyle, may help women lead a good life.

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