

## REPORT OF VMC PPG EVENT

Topic: MENOPAUSE MATTERS

Time and place: 6.30 Thursday 10 May 2018, Group Room VMC

Speakers:

*Dr Susan Rankine*, GP Partner, VMC, with a special interest in Women's Health

*Nigel Denby*, Registered Dietician    *Anna Kiff*, Acupuncturist

**Dr Rankine** opened the meeting by clarifying that 'the menopause' is when you have your last period. Perimenopause is what happens before the menopause and post-menopause is what happens after. The menopause generally occurs between the ages of 47 and 54 with the average age being 51 years but the symptoms can last from 5 to 20 years or more.

The symptoms associated with the menopause occur at the time of life when women's ovaries begin to lose their reproductive function and the levels of our female hormones oestrogen and progesterone begin to fall. Some symptoms of the menopause are very visible and can be distressing. They include hot flushes, joint pains, mood swings, irritability, insomnia and indecision. Since oestrogen protects the heart and bones there are also hidden symptoms: a greater risk of heart disease, reduced bone density with the risk of osteoporosis, and possibly weight gain. Dr Rankine then highlighted the Seven Dwarfs of the menopause:



100 years ago when a woman's life expectancy was 45 years most women did not reach the age of the menopause, and those that did coped with the symptoms as best they could in a domestic environment. Today, most of us are working women, many with stressful jobs who need to perform at their best throughout the menopausal years. Some women are fortunate to sail through the menopause with little discomfort, but most of us need help to alleviate the symptoms in order to carry on as normal. 45% of women say that work can be a struggle during the menopause and 47% say they would not tell their employer the real reason for taking time off. The menopause can adversely affect people's sex lives, and partners are often feel helpless because they don't understand what's going on. So what are the treatment options? There are basically three treatment options:

1. Medical/pharmaceutical – Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)
2. Lifestyle and diet
3. Alternatives such as acupuncture, herbal remedies and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

of which the most effective is HRT, which can be used in conjunction with other treatments. There are a lot of myths surrounding HRT and many of the things said about it are simply not evidence based. Scientific studies tell us that the increased risk of breast cancer and cardiovascular problems are minuscule compared with lifestyle risk factors. On the contrary HRT will protect the heart if taken early on in the menopause and is the best preventer of osteoporosis, whereas being overweight more than doubles the risk of breast cancer in women aged 50–59. HRT does not 'delay the inevitable'; it effectively manages the symptoms of the menopause, and lower doses of HRT continue to work when women are older. It is not true that you can only have HRT for 5 years. It may be taken for as long as necessary at the lowest effective dose.

In conclusion Dr Rankine said: There is no need to suffer. HRT can bring huge relief for many of the symptoms women have to suffer during the menopause. You can stop quickly or gradually. If you get your symptoms back you may need to continue taking HRT. The reason you take HRT is that it makes you feel better. To prove it, one patient in the audience, a sprightly 88 year old, admitted that she had been taking HRT for over 30 years!

Q How do I know if I'm menopausal I have a Mirena coil in?

A. **Dr Rankine:** The Mirena coil is a very good method of contraception and also prevents bleeding during periods. It is therefore difficult to know when your periods have stopped. However, the menopause is about various symptoms such as hot flushes and tiredness, insomnia and mood swings. If you are the right sort of age and have these symptoms, you are likely to be menopausal regardless of not knowing if you have stopped your periods. The Mirena coil is also used to provide cover for HRT.

**Nigel Denby** then spoke about the importance of lifestyle and diet during the menopause. Although he began by saying unequivocally that lifestyle and diet on its own is never as effective as HRT. He listed the following key factors to be aware of:

- \* eat a healthy diet
- \* maintain a healthy weight
- \* reduce salt – less is best
- \* increase calcium and Vitamin D – both essential for healthy bones. We get Vitamin D from sunlight so get out and about every day.
- \* manage your cholesterol – avoid high-cholesterol foods, eat more oats, almonds, Benecol, Flora pro-active.
- \* keep up your fluid intake – two litres a day of water
- \* eat soya foods that contain plant-derived phytoestrogens often called dietary oestrogens they are a weak natural alternative to HRT

The most important thing is to trim your diet. At the menopause your calorie requirements fall by 200 calories a day (1 x 2-stick Kit-Kat) so you need to take definite action to avoid weight gain. It is a moment to be motivated and to achieve that 200-calorie deficit. It is pretty easy to make those calorie savings. Take control little by little.

In answer to a question about herbal remedies, both speakers said: Just because it is

dressed-up as being natural it doesn't mean that it is safe. In many cases the studies haven't been done. As long as it does no harm, it can be worth a try.

Q Surely the problem with consuming more dairy foods is that you put on weight?

A. ND: The calcium is in the watery part of milk and yoghurts so semi-skimmed and low-fat alternatives as just as good as full fat.

**Anna Kiff** then explained how acupuncture therapy had proved to be effective in alleviating menopausal symptoms as part of an overall plan combined with HRT, diet and lifestyle, although it usually takes a few months rather than weeks. It can also relieve restless legs, as confirmed by an enthusiastic member of the audience.

For reliable information on the effects of Hormone Replacement Therapy, VMC and the PPG advise you to read the latest scientific facts and guidance on the British Menopause Society (BMS) website: <https://thebms.org.uk> or Women's Health Concern: <https://www.womens-health-concern.org>