

Health

September 30, 2007

Andropause: Midlife crisis, male menopause or myth?

Most people know that women experience menopause, but did you know that some men go through a kind of male menopause? For men who believe they are going through the proverbial midlife crisis, some doctors and researchers suggest that these men may actually be experiencing a form of male menopause called "andropause." Andropause is characterized by a loss of testosterone, the hormone that makes men "men." Although the drop in testosterone is a normal part of aging, for some men it is accompanied by a gradual and undesired decline in their sexuality, mood, energy and sometimes health.

The first study on andropause was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in the mid-1940s. The concept is widely accepted in Australia, Canada and some parts of Europe, but did not gain interest in the U.S. until recently. Much of the current interest in this phenomenon has been initiated by the book "Male Menopause" by Jed Diamond. Diamond, who has neither an M.D. nor a Ph.D., states that this hormonal change occurs in all men, generally between the ages of 40 and 55, though it can occur as early as 35 and as late as 65. Studies done by the World Health Organization found that male androgen levels at about age 70 are only 10 percent of what they were during youth.

Shocking as it may be to some men, male menopause, or andropause, is becoming more widely recognized and accepted by physicians for the changes many middle-age men experience, such as irritability, fatigue, erection problems, energy loss, depression, reduced libido and sometimes sexual dysfunction. This male "transition" is gradual and expands over many decades, and symptoms can be vague and varied, including hormonal, psychological, interpersonal, social, sexual and spiritual ones.

While the concept of andropause is gaining strength, there is a huge debate about whether it actually exists as a clinical phenomenon. Some say that "male menopause" is not a correct term because: a) men don't have menstrual periods and therefore cannot stop having them; b) unlike those in women, men's reproductive systems do not cease to work completely in midlife, and some men continue to father children late into their lives; and c) men do not show the same dramatic drop in hormone levels characteristic of menopause in women. It also is not clear how much this supposedly universal male phenomenon can be related to negative bodily changes in midlife due to aging and the accumulated effects of lack of exercise, poor diet, excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, psychological problems, hypertension and stress. Those who recognize andropause, on the other hand, claim it is a biological change that affects men's lives in the same way menopause affects women's.

There are several things men can do to cope with the inevitable changes in midlife:

1. **Eat right.**
2. **Stay physically fit.** Engage in regular exercise that includes aerobic endurance, muscular strength and flexibility.
3. **Work more seriously on weight loss.** Maintaining ideal weight is the route to a longer life.
4. **Get regular health checkups.**

5. Reduce stress.

6. Take on new challenges to keep a supply of freshness and excitement in your life. What about writing a book, a song or poetry? Go back to school. Learn a new hobby or take up an old one.

7. Include rest and leisure in your life.

8. Talk more freely about your midlife anxieties.

9. Care for yourself psychologically. If you need to talk to someone, find a counselor. Music and books can help you relax. Create a place in your home that is your own, such as a meditation room or private office, or somewhere outside the home, such as a park or lake.

10. Change the scenery occasionally. A change of scenery improves one's spirit even if only for short periods of time. Attend an out-of-state conference, plan weekends of camping or boating, visit the ocean or hike in the mountains.

Instead of anticipating happiness tomorrow, we need to find happiness today. Waiting until everything is perfect before making a move (e.g., "when the kids are grown," "when I get my promotion," "when the house is paid off," "when I retire," etc.) is like not starting a trip until all the traffic lights are green.

Women should recognize that men do go through real changes in midlife, no matter what we call it. Women shouldn't joke about it, making men feel "less than" because they experience these changes. We all need reassurance, and men who feel a loss during this time have an extra need for being reassured they are needed. Some men feel that their perceived losses include power, purpose, passion and potency. They need to know they are loved and appreciated just the way they are. Open the lines of communication and spend time together having fun and getting to know each other. Women can encourage men to become active in a men's group for support and should let go of their own fears related to a man's spending time alone. And remember, as George Burns said, "You can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old."