



Menopause; The marketing juggernaut

By Kristine Blenkhorn Rodriguez, Special to the Tribune

30 May 2007

Copyright 2007, Chicago Tribune. All Rights Reserved.

In the not-so-distant past, the word "menopause" could clear a room. Now it's everywhere. Books, articles, clothing -- even a popular musical -- all trumpet the word.

What changed? Strength exists in numbers, and money talks. A female Baby Boomer turns 50 every seven minutes, says Karen Giblin, founder of Red Hot Mamas, an organization that provides **menopause** education. In the United States, an estimated 37 million women are menopausal, according to the book "Is It Hot in Here? Or Is It Me? The Complete Guide to Menopause," by Newsweek reporters Pat Wingert and Barbara Kantrowitz.

These same 37 million women are part of a privileged buying pool, one that has transformed menopause from a verboten word into a marketing phenomenon. And the Boomers who make up this group are attempting to do with menopause what they have always done: Blaze a trail.

Boomers wield an estimated \$2.1 trillion in spending money, according to the MetLife Mature Market Institute, the information and policy arm of insurance company MetLife. They spend it on kids, vacation homes, apparel -- and their biggest life transition. "We are the healthiest, wealthiest, best-educated women to reach this age ever," says Dotsie Bregel, founder of www.boomerwomenspeak.com, a site for Boomer women. No numbers are available on how many menopause-related products are being sold, but such products seem to be more visible throughout popular culture than ever before.

Helping create the perfect storm for marketers is the utterly individual nature of menopause.

"It's rare that any two women have the same menopause experience," says Pamela Boggs, director of education and development for the North American Menopause Society.

Another factor is the lack of agreement among health care professionals regarding the risks of hormone replacement therapy. Since the release of information from the controversial Women's Health Initiative study in July 2002 warning of the potential health risks associated with estrogen therapy, women are frantically searching for alternatives. The study was halted early because results showed women on hormone therapy had increased risks for breast cancer, stroke, blood clots and heart attack.

Study results misleading

Since then, doctors and others have tried to explain that the results don't apply to all women.

"The average age of the women in that study was 63," says Dr. Catherine Harth, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Chicago. "Most women considering hormone therapy in the short term are much younger than that."

In addition, half the women in the study were current or former smokers, and a third of them were chronically hypertensive and on medication, says Dr. Mary Jane Minkin, clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Yale University School of Medicine and co-author of "A Woman's Guide to Menopause and Perimenopause." "It caused many internists to tell women to get off of hormone therapy fast. ... Then, the same women would come to me a month later and say, My hot flashes are killing me. Do something."

Both doctors use a range of therapies, from traditional to alternative.

Information onslaught

Self-education is complicated by the plethora of books, Web sites, data, medications, supplements and other products on the market. Minkin calls this phenomenon the Suzanne Somers effect. The actress has published books about bioidentical hormones, or hormones that proponents say are chemically identical to those in the human body (as opposed to synthetic hormones, which do not make that claim).

"I think it's good [Somers is] bringing this up ... but there's no proof that bioidenticals are any safer or more effective than traditional hormone therapy," Minkin says.

A search for the word "menopause" in Amazon.com's books section yields more than 20,000 results. The onslaught of conflicting information is complicated by lack of FDA regulation on alternative products such as herbs.

"These products are now readily available," Harth says. "That's not a bad thing if the substance is relatively safe. But some herbals carry significant risks."

"Women are somewhat overwhelmed," says Dr. Margery Gass, professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and director of the college's Menopause and Osteoporosis Center. "They're hitting what can be a difficult period in their life, both physically and emotionally. ... They want one answer, and doctors can't give it to them because doctors don't agree on what's right."

Dr. JoAnn Pinkerton, director of the Midlife Health Center at the University of Virginia, advises women to consult authoritative sources before buying books and products.

"There are some national organizations that are providing information on menopause and recommending good books and/or products," she says. "They'll give you unbiased info." Among those she recommends are the National Women's Health Resource Center (healthywomen.org), the National Institutes of Health (health.nih.gov) and the Endocrine Society (www.endo-society.org).

Women must beware of companies that offer hope in a jar -- or on a cotton swab, says author Wingert, who spoke at a menopause panel discussion held early this year at the University of Illinois Medical Center in Chicago. Some companies, for example, say that if a woman sends in her saliva on a cotton swab, they can help her through a cocktail of supplements and hormones.

"Women need to be much more skeptical of what is suggested to them," Wingert says. "Saliva actually breaks down estrogen in the mouth. So there is no way a company can mimic the estrogen flowing through your body through a small saliva sample. It just wouldn't be accurate."

Very little surprises Bregel when it comes to these products. "It would be nice to think we'll be able to sort through the hype and figure this out for the younger generation," she says.

Spoken like a true Boomer woman.

- - -

Navigating the change

Online

www.menopause.org : The North American Menopause Society offers a variety of information.

www.redhotmamas.org : The Red Hot Mamas offers educational materials on perimenopause and menopause.

www.boomerwomenspeak.com : Site includes an online forum on menopause.

Print

A Woman's Guide to Menopause and Perimenopause, By Dr. Mary Jane Minkin and Carol V. Wright (Yale University Press, \$18) Offers analysis on recent research and advice on a variety of issues.

Is It Hot in Here? Or Is It Me? The Complete Guide to Menopause, By Pat Wingert and Barbara Kantrowitz (Workman Publishing, \$17.95) Written in the style of "What to Expect When You're Expecting," with short chapters and Q&As.

Menopause With Science and Soul: A Guidebook for Navigating the Journey By Judith Boice (Celestial Arts, \$16.95) Naturopath Boice offers advice on navigating menopause.

The Wisdom of Menopause By Dr. Christiane Northrup (Bantam, \$20) Discusses the physical and emotional changes brought on by menopause.