Coping With Menopause After an Ovarian Cancer Hysterectomy

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How to Deal With Ovarian Cancer Menopause

If you've been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, chances are good that you had to undergo some type of surgical intervention. Typically, a gynecologist will perform the needed surgery to remove as much cancer as possible.

Most women undergo the removal of the uterus, cervix, both ovaries and fallopian tubes; this surgery is called a total abdominal hysterectomy and bilateral salpingo-oopherectomy.

Chances are good that if you're reading this, you've made it through the surgery. You're now dealing with the symptoms that are associated with a hysterectomy — the lovely menopausal symptoms that come *after* you've already undergone a major abdominal surgery, plus possibly other treatments for your cancer.

Dealing with the symptoms of menopause isn't fun — especially if you aren't at a menopausal age. However, it is possible to live comfortably during this stage of your life.

Hot Flashes

If there is one thing everyone knows about menopause, it is that it causes hot flashes. It is likely the most complained about symptom of menopause.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is often prescribed after surgical menopause. HRT is the ingestion of estrogen and progestin or estrogen alone. It is prescribed to counteract the loss of estrogen, as the ovaries produce estrogen.

HRT is a hot-button topic these days. However, it is undoubtedly the most effective treatment for postmenopausal hot flashes.

Pros:

- If a total hysterectomy is done before the age of 50 (the age of the average menopausal woman), the risk of heart disease, Parkinson's disease and dementia increases. HRT may help reduce the risk of developing these diseases.
- It can reduce severe hot flashes. Some studies show that it has reduced hot flashes by up to 75 percent.
- It can slow down osteoporosis and may reduce the risk of colorectal cancer.

Cons:

- If the hysterectomy is done over the age of 50, estrogen levels will have been dropping anyways due to the natural progression towards menopause. Evidence points to the fact that the older the age of starting HRT, the higher the cardiovascular risk.

- It is not suggested for women with liver disease.
- You’re at a higher risk for blood clots, stroke, breast cancer and heart attack.

Weigh the pros and cons of HRT with your doctor carefully to decide if it is for you. If you decide to forego HRT, antidepressants from the SSRI family are known to reduce hot flashes. Likewise, gabapentin (Neurontin) may also be helpful for women suffering with both hot flashes and migraines.

Medications aside, there are lifestyle modifications that can help with hot flashes. Some women note that certain things will trigger a hot flash, such as ingestion of caffeine, spicy food, alcohol and stress.

If you are able to pinpoint a stressor, try to avoid it. Keep cold water available and dress in layers for when the inevitable hot flash hits!

Vaginal Discomfort

Menopause is also known to cause vaginal discomfort and dryness. It may seem counterintuitive, but keeping sexually active will increase blood flow the vagina, aiding in the discomfort.

Using water-based lubricants (K-Y Jelly) and moisturizers (Replens) can also help. Select lubricants and moisturizers that do not contain glycerin, which may cause burning or irritation.

Sleeplessness

The hormonal imbalance can affect sleep, as can hot flashes. If you’re lying awake night after night, you’re not alone.

Avoid caffeine, especially in the later part of the day. Exercise can also promote sleep, so try vigorous exercise earlier in the day or a gentle yoga routine before bed.

If hot flashes are disturbing your sleep, keep your room clean and cool, as well.

Anxiety

It is likely that between the ovarian cancer diagnosis and the menopausal symptoms, you are experiencing anxiety. Find ways to deal with your anxiety, whether it is medication, therapy, an exercise routine, or talking to a good friend.

If the anxiety you are experiencing seems extreme, speak to your doctor for recommendations.