

MENOPAUSE & BEYOND

the good news | BY KIM CHILDS

When American obstetrician and gynecologist Dr. Christiane Northrup wrote *The Wisdom of Menopause* in 2001, she was in the midst of her own midlife change. In her latest PBS special,

Menopause and Beyond—New Wisdom for Women, she offers an update, declaring, “I’ve been to the mountaintop and come down the other side, and I can tell you that the news is good—really, really good!”

The good news, says Northrup, is that menopause is a re-birth for women, and a reawakening of life force energy that can be tapped for new pursuits. She says this view of menopause contradicts predominant cultural messages about a woman’s ability to thrive after midlife.

“The news is full of bad news about the body,” says Northrup, “and it’s not true!”

new Rx for midlife

Today, along with offering advice on nutrition, exercise, and hormone replacement therapies, this leading expert on women’s health is also telling menopausal women to heal unfinished emotional business, change any relationships, jobs or behaviors that increase stress, and live their true passions and pleasures “out loud.” Northrup says this sets the stage for a new life that is not dictated by the needs of children and family.

“It’s like you are freed up to tune into the needs and requirements of your own soul, and the channel for spirit becomes much wider,” says Northrup. “It’s getting your life back on track so that it’s fueled from what’s real and sustainable.”

Following her own counsel, Northrup will spend much of 2007 traveling the United States to promote her new website, her print and electronic newsletters, and revised editions of *The Wisdom of Menopause* and *Women’s Bodies, Women’s Wisdom*, first published in 1994. A former co-president of the American Holistic



DR. CHRISTINE NORTHROP



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Medical Association, Northrup has been a pioneer in the mind/body health field for decades. Not surprisingly, she has a lot to say about the effects of modern day stress on women's health, and recalls how it once affected her body.

"My maximum weight was in my 40s," says Northrup. "I was completely stressed out, going through a divorce, and taking care of a friend who'd had massive surgery. I couldn't do any of the things that I needed to do to replenish myself."

Like getting plenty of sleep and eating well, she says, and enjoying quality restaurants with good friends or a good book. This doctor lives in Maine "for a reason," and limits her intake of TV news—a prescription that she might write liberally these days.

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"We were not designed to handle the hand-picked, specifically-orchestrated-to-background-music bad news of the entire planet each and every day in our living rooms or bedrooms," Northrup says, adding that American nervous systems have not caught up to American technology, and that most people ingest more information in a day than their ancestors did in a year.

Sleep is also when the body "eats up" stress hormones, she says, and so a diet of stressful messages before bed can disrupt that process. Exercise is another stress-buster, says Northrup, and a way to boost cardiovascular health at a time when the American Heart Association reports that heart disease is the number one killer of women over 25.

"Many, many more women will die of heart disease or stroke than breast cancer," says Northrup, who recommends that all women screen for early signs of cardiovascular disease. She says no one is doomed by a family history of chronic illness, and that proper nutrition, sleep, and exercise can offset any genetic predisposition to heart disease.

"The other thing is to take things off your plate," she says. "If you're working full time and volunteering and orchestrating family activities and doing the shopping and picking up the dry cleaning, delegate some stuff!"

eating for real pleasure

Northrup's nutritional advice for heart health includes a diet rich in fruits, grains, vegetables and legumes, low in meat, and lowest in refined carbohydrates, which can wreak havoc on blood sugar levels and overall health. Ironically, she notes, many women seek to manage their stress by consuming too many simple carbohydrates—including alcohol—because they temporarily trigger the body's pleasure hormones.

Northrup recommends pursuing

pleasurable activities instead, and recalls meeting a woman who'd replaced bar-hopping with belly dancing. She cites this as an example of choosing self-gratification over self-medication in a life that can still include sweets.

"When you've got a life based on sustainable pleasure, you're going to have your carbs, but they're really high quality and they're deliberate," says Northrup. "When you have dessert it's a celebration and it's not some cheap bag of cookies that you're sneaking in your desk. It's gonna be some \$6 dessert at a high end restaurant that you share with friends."

Northrup says that the notorious midlife "spread" is not inevitable, and that she has lost weight since going through menopause. Her prescription for maintaining a healthy weight includes curbing metabolic stressors—poor nutrition, inadequate rest, constant worrying and

stress—that can raise cortisol and cause the body to store more fat. She advises women to monitor their weight and body mass index (to calculate, visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/), keep waist measurements at 35 inches or less, and practice conscious eating, that is, sitting down for meals, reducing portions, and waiting 20 minutes before taking seconds.

"I believe in maximally enjoying food," says Northrup, "and I find that the discipline of weighing myself daily and keeping on track of it actually allows me to enjoy food more because I must be mindful of every bite I eat."

exercise & supplements

Exercise aids weight control by improving metabolism. Northrup says other benefits include better circulation, increased bone mass, and a boost to the "feel-good" beta endorphins. Even 20 minutes of exercise a week is better than nothing, says the good doctor, who admits to dancing around her house on a regular basis. She recommends walking as great exercise (ideally 10,000 steps a day, monitored with a pedometer), and says that weight training helps women feel stronger physically, mentally and emotionally.

For women of all ages, Northrup strongly recommends multivitamins with antioxidants. Green and black tea make her list, too, as do Omega-3 fatty acids found in cold water fish and fish oils. Omega 3s can reduce hot flashes and support the cells, heart and brain, says Northrup, who adds that fish oils can benefit the nervous system much like the SSRI drugs that are prescribed for depression. Women also need



adequate magnesium, which can help with migraines, anxiety and insomnia. Calcium improves bone health, says Northrup, but that's not the whole picture when it comes to preventing osteoporosis.

"We have really missed the boat on Vitamin D," Northrup reports, citing current research that says the Recommended Daily Allowance (400 IUs a day) was designed to prevent rickets, and is actually insufficient for most women. "You find your worst cases of osteoporosis in those who have the lowest levels of Vitamin D."

A blood test can help women to determine if they are deficient in Vitamin D. Northrup recommends taking 1000 IUs a day through supplements and natural sources like salmon and sunshine. This vitamin can also help to prevent breast and colon cancers.

hormones, sex & sensuality

On hormonal changes at midlife, Northrup says that women's bodies are actually designed to maintain hormonal balance throughout life. Even so, metabolic stressors and weak adrenal glands can predispose women to hormonal imbalances that can be corrected with outside help. She says that supplements like DHEA, phytoestrogens (found in soy and hemp and flax seeds), and bio-identical hormones can help if they are prescribed to suit a woman's individual needs. Synthetic hormones, once widely and routinely prescribed, can have dangerous side effects, says Northrup, adding that the days of one-dose-fits-all hormone therapy are over.

"Some women need a little estro-

gen and some don't need anything," says Northrup. "Trust your body, experiment."

Northrup has more good news for women about sexuality and sensuality at midlife. She says research shows that women are capable of sexual pleasure and fulfillment at every stage of life, and that menopause itself does not decrease libido or sexual function. Hormonal support can help those women who do experience vaginal dryness or reduced sex drive, she says, while all women can enjoy better sex by reclaiming their right to pleasure, healing traumas and relationship issues, and "letting go of perfect" at midlife.

"You're less concerned with perfect body image," says Northrup. "And later in life you know what feels good and feel free to express yourself sexually, spiritually and emotionally."

The pursuit of authentic pleasure and joy also affects overall health. Northrup says that she's met women who have reversed abnormal pap smears and recovered from lupus and chronic migraines "by having enough courage to go for what is pleasurable in a culture that tells you that you're not honorable as a woman unless you are suffering."

lessons learned

Some women may have emotional and psychological work to do at menopause, which Northrup calls an "exciting developmental stage that's designed to heal all the unhealed parts of you." This means that unfinished emotional business—from childhood on up—may surface during the premenopausal and perimenopausal years for women to

feel, address and heal.

"If you don't make the space [for healing] deliberately," says Northrup, "then you will attract a crisis that will make it for you."

Northrup tells about a fibroid in her own body that resisted her attempts to heal it through alternative medicine. She says it was her body's manifestation of the growing turmoil in her marriage that she did not want to face. Tired of "dressing around it," she eventually had the fibroid removed surgically.

"The fibroid taught me a ton," Northrup says, "and when I was going under [anesthesia] I said to the anesthesiologist, 'Please repeat the following: When you awaken, the pattern that caused this will have left,' and I was divorced two years later."

Women of all ages can practice good self-care for decades of vibrant living, says Northrup, noting that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report average life-spans of 80 years for white women, and 76 for black and Hispanic women. With so many postmenopausal years ahead of her and the women she counsels, the doctor offers this advice and prediction.

"What you want to do is die young as late as possible," says Northrup. "I don't think I'm going to hit my stride 'til 65."

In addition to her pioneering books and PBS specials, Dr. Christiane Northrup co-founded the Women to Women health care center in Yarmouth, Maine, which became a model for women's clinics nationwide. Her books, CDs, videos and newsletters are available at DrNorthrup.com.