What has oestrogen got to do with it (in women's hair thinning and hair loss)?

by Ravi Bhanot

Menopause brings with it a change in hormonal balance of oestrogen and progesterone. This sometimes causes some unpleasant symptoms – like hot flushes, forgetfulness and hair thinning or hair loss.

Oestrogen and/or phytoestrogen replacement therapy helps in alleviating some of these symptoms. The treatment helps in maintaining firm skin and muscle tone, a greater sense of wellbeing and helps maintain a healthy sexual function.

Taking oestrogen containing drugs has been quite common for controlling menopausal symptoms, including hair loss; there have been some concerns about possible side effects of hormone replacement therapies. There has therefore been a decline in taking this medication in some groups of women. Natural alternatives to hormone drugs such as phytoestrogens have at the same time seen an increase in popularity.

These natural oestrogenic extracts from plant sources mimic natural oestrogens. These are hormones that women produce naturally and regularly before menopause.

Phytoestrogens have four families – the isoflavanoids, stilbenes, lignans and coumenstans. The most popular source of phytoestrogens is soya. It contains the isoflavones genistein, daidzein, and glycitein. Genistein and daidzein particularly have been well studied.

This may explain why hair loss and hair thinning is far less seen in communities that eat soya – particularly in Asia. Interestingly in Japan, communities that have moved from their traditional high-soya diet to fast foods such as pizzas and burgers have seen an increase in hair loss compared to their compatriots who have stuck to their original diets.

Though genistein is not as strong as the body's most common oestrogen, estradiol, it is physiologically active at appropriate levels.

Stilenes, the second class of phytoestrogens, is represented by resveratol. This is seen in concentrated form in red grape skins. This may account for the beneficial effects of drinking moderate amounts of red wine or red grape juice. It is thought that resveratol may also influence oestrogen receptors.

The third family of oestrogens – the lignans are seen in large amounts in foods such as flaxseed, whole grains, vegetables and tea. It is believed that bacteria living in the gut convert the Lignans into oestrogenic compounds. Recent research published in the Journal of Hypertension showed that eating these foods help reduce blood pressure.

Legumes and soya beans contain the fourth class of oestrogens – the coumestants. However, only a few of these coumestants show the oestrogen activity.

Interestingly research shows that women with higher levels of phytoestrogens are also less likely to develop breast cancer. In another words, breast cancer sufferers had much lower levels of phytoestrogens than seen in normal people.

Another piece of interesting evidence suggests that phytoestrogens help improve memory, both short and long, as well as attention.

“If you suffer from low oestrogen symptoms such as hair loss or forgetfulness eat oestrogen-rich foods every day or take a natural alternative standardized plant extract supplement of phytoestrogens from soya,” says Ravi Bhanot, manufacturer of Nutrigro Female Hair Food Plus capsules.

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