Concurrent use of self-prescribed complementary and alternative medicine, and hormone replacement therapy in menopause: possible side effects

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Abstract
Whilst women frequently visit general practitioners for help with menopausal symptoms, research shows many women also self-prescribe complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) to control these symptoms. Further research is required to understand women's motivations for self-prescribing CAM during menopause and to inform safe usage if these CAM and hormone products are utilised concurrently.

Keywords: Menopause; self-prescription; complementary and alternative medicine; hormone replacement therapy

Every woman will go through menopause. Whilst women frequently visit general practitioners (GPs) for help with menopausal symptoms, and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is the most common treatment prescribed, research shows menopausal women are also frequent users of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), often without the guidance of a CAM practitioner. Concerns have been raised that self-prescribed CAM products may have troubling side effects and may interact with hormone products.

There may be several reasons that women self-prescribe CAM alongside conventional HRT treatment. For example, the belief that CAM is inherently safe may lead menopausal women to consider there is no harm in self-prescribing these products alongside conventional medications such as HRT. This belief may be strengthened by the fact that most CAM products are not of a synthetic nature and CAM products can be easily accessed in retail stores such as pharmacies, supermarkets and health food shops without any limitations. Furthermore, research has shown some menopausal women make treatment decisions (including CAM) exclusively by themselves. They may consider their health is their own responsibility, especially those who are long-term users of CAM products. Menopausal women may also perceive there is no need to talk about their ‘safe’ CAM use when GPs prescribe HRT for their symptoms. Meanwhile, research has shown that some GPs hold negative attitudes towards the use of CAM in menopause care, which may make it more difficult for menopausal women to discuss their use of CAM with them. Cost is another possible reason that menopausal women may self-prescribe CAM. Visits to GPs and medical specialists are covered or subsidised by Australian Medicare while only a few types of CAM consultations are eligible for private health insurance rebates, making visits to CAM practitioners more expensive. Since CAM products are generally believed to be safe, menopausal women might seek information regarding CAM use from a number of unprofessional sources and counterbalance their overall medicine cost by ceasing consultations with CAM practitioners.

Currently, there is a lack of high quality information regarding side effects and interactions between HRT and commonly used CAM products. However, the possible risks in relation to the concurrent use of CAM and HRT without professional advice strongly highlight the need of further multi-method studies. Conventional and CAM health care providers need to be aware of menopausal women's perceptions, their reasons for their choice of therapy, and their expectations of CAM practitioners (i.e. naturopaths, Chinese herbal medicine practitioners and acupuncturists) for symptom relief. It is important that further investigations provide details of the health-seeking behaviour, decision-making progress, and information sources of menopause women who take HRT and also utilise self-prescribed CAM. In addition, the concurrent utilisation of self-prescribed CAM and professional-prescribed HRT suggests a significant opportunity for GPs, gynaecologists and/or endocrinologists to take a more active role in guiding menopause care. It is an imperative for conventional medical practitioners to initiate conversations with menopausal women about their CAM use during routine visits, advise these women to be cautious about CAM-HRT polypharmacy, and refer these women to a qualified CAM practitioner for safety advice if necessary. Due to the broad diversity of CAM products and practices, in order to achieve optimal menopause care, these conventional medical...
practitioners may need to acquire sufficient knowledge of CAM through attending CAM workshops or training and cooperating with CAM practitioners.\(^{13}\)

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References