

Planet Menopause

Informed support during menopause can be hard to find, so Heather Fairburn is taking action

I was in my mid-forties when a friend mentioned she was concerned she might be suffering from early menopausal symptoms and didn't know who to turn to for advice since her mother had died a few years earlier. "Don't worry," I glibly replied, "I'll ask my mother – she'll be able to help." But no such luck. My mum airily informed me that she didn't have a clue since she'd gone onto Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) as soon as she felt the first twinges and had, therefore, never suffered from the normal malaises that many women go through.

It became apparent, speaking with my peers, that even though we were fast approaching (some of us had even landed on) Planet Menopause, few of us had received any words of wisdom or guidance as to how to cope with what can be a life-changing period of our lives. For some reason, the menopause is still swept under the carpet. Most men find it difficult to contribute for obvious reasons, and many women find the M-word just too excruciating to chew the cud over.

It was this overwhelming ignorance that inspired 50-year-old Topsham woman, Heather Fairbairn, to set up the social enterprise company Menopause Support, which combines courses with an interactive website delivering information, self-help tips and useful exercises and techniques to enable women to take more control of their lives.

Heather had suffered bad menopausal symptoms for five years, and although she knew she didn't want HRT, she couldn't find the support that she needed to make crucial decisions about how to treat her symptoms. So she set about doing the research herself.

As an Oxford Science graduate with an MA in Complementary Health Studies from Exeter University, Heather was well positioned to examine the different

options. At the same time she took a critical look at her life, examining what she ate and drank, and how she worked and exercised.

"Every woman's menopause is different, so what is the 'right' treatment for one is not necessarily 'right' for another, and they need to make informed choices," says Heather. "I found there was a confusing amount of information and support was limited.

"Without wishing to sound too doom and gloom, it really can be a dreadful experience. Hot flushes, insomnia, mood swings, vaginal dryness, panic attacks, irritability, headaches, weight gain, aching joints and forgetfulness are just some that spring to mind. On top of confidence-cracking wrinkles, sags, unsightly lumps and bumps, plus lifestyle changes such as children flying the nest, it's a time when you really need someone to turn to," she said.

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The Menopause Support programme has been reviewed and approved by a number of healthcare professionals including nutritionists, complementary therapists, doctors and psychologists. As well as covering how food, drink, supplements and exercise can have an effect, the course also explores the latest research on HRT, as well as offering tips on how to look and feel gorgeous.

Participants are encouraged to start a Menopause Journal recording worst symptoms and levels of coping. They are also asked to consider how physical



The next course in Devon is on 26 and 27 June at Exeter Golf and Country Club. To take part in a course please contact Heather Fairbairn on 01392 876122 or visit www.menopausesupport.org.uk.

relationships change, and how to talk to partners as well as explaining to work colleagues and family about how the menopause is affecting them. An exercise on the 5-a-day for a happier life is included and suggestions for which are the best supplements and foods – the menopause cake is certainly worth investigating!

Course members are asked to respect each other's confidentiality – what's said in the group stays in the group – and any initial nerves soon disappear after everyone is asked to share their symptoms, which comes as a surprisingly reassuring experience.

Heather says: "What women also really like is the fact we are helping them to become 'informed shoppers'; they learn what to look out for on the labels and packaging so they get the right product to help them at the best value for money."

Since the new website was launched in March, the forum pages have proved particularly popular along with Heather's regular blog. □ **MICHELE SAMMONS**