ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES FOR MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOM CARE: OUTLINING POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

Terapias alternativas para os cuidados dos sintomas da menopausa: delineando possibilidades e desafios

Terapias alternativas para el cuidado de los síntomas de la menopausia: delineando las posibilidades y los desafíos

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How to quote this article:

ABSTRACT

Objective: The study's goal has been to analyze the main alternative therapies that might reduce the menopause symptoms, as well as to present the challenges faced by nursing professionals dealing with it. Methods: It is an integrative literature review, having a descriptive and exploratory approach. There were used the following databases: the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) and the Literatura Latino-americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (LILACS) [Latin-American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences]. There were found 145 studies, of which 11 met the inclusion criteria according to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) stages. Results: The main alternative therapies identified were as follows: physical exercise, acupuncture, hydrotherapy, medicinal plants, yoga and guided imagery. Each of the indicated modalities of therapy has positive benefits in reducing the menopause symptoms. Nurses play a significant role towards adherence and fulfilment of alternative therapies, but there is still excessive unawareness about how to carry out such practices. Conclusion: It is important to include teaching and qualification in alternative therapies within university education and programs of permanent education in collective health.

Descriptors: Complementary therapies, Nursing care, Menopause, Nursing, Climacteric period.

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RESUMO


Descritores: Terapias Complementares, Cuidados de Enfermagem, Menopausa, Enfermagem, Climatério.

INTRODUCTION

Menopause is a biological process that occurs as part of a woman’s aging. This stage of life corresponds to the date of the last menstruation as a result of definitive ovarian failure. The clinical diagnosis is made only after twelve consecutive months of amenorrhea, which is not explained by another either pathological or physiological cause.1 The age that it usually occurs is from 45 to 55 years old, which can be classified into perimenopause when referring to the phase before menopause. At this stage, endocrinological, biological and clinical changes begin to approach menopause and the first year after menopause. In iatrogenic menopause, menstruation ceases as a result of surgical removal of the ovaries (with or without hysterectomy), or after iatrogenic ablation of ovary functions (chemotherapy or radiation). Pre-menopause includes the entire reproductive phase before menopause. Postmenopause is the period after the last menstruation; and early menopause occurs at an age of less than two standard deviations below the average age of menopause for the population.1

During menopause, women experience physical and psychological changes resulting from hypoestrogenism and cellular aging. Among the most frequent complaints that lead women to resort to the health services network are vasomotor symptoms, sleep disorders, weight gain, and vaginal bleeding. Targeting to alleviate the symptoms, hormone replacement therapies are recommended by physicians.1,2

Nonetheless, even though all the benefits of synthetic hormone replacement therapy are currently known, many women who are undergoing menopause cease treatment after the first year of use, as adverse effects such as irregular bleeding, nausea, headache, retention are common. water, weight gain, in addition to the common fear of breast cancer.3

There are alternative treatments, which can be complementary elements to hormonal therapy, such as: acupuncture, pilates, physical exercises, hydrotherapy, food reorientation, nutritional supplementation, in addition to phytotherapy and art and music therapy workshops, which help to reduce the relative side effects to menopause, such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness, urinary incontinence, decreased libido, fatigue, weight gain and changes in sleep, memory, and mood.4

Given the aforementioned, alternative therapies have been the subject of discussion in recent years within the scientific area, with gaps in their recommendation, ways of implementation and the incorporation of such practices by nursing professionals while providing care to women undergoing menopause. The justification for the development of this study is given by the relevance of this theme, which pursues to systematically highlight the main alternative therapies already described in the literature, which have a positive potential to help women face this complex phase of life, thus improving quality of life. Therefore, it is important to develop studies that can present the real benefits of alternative therapies. Hence, the scientific community and society itself will become aware of the great potential of such practices when dealing with the menopause symptoms.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, the study meant to analyze the main alternative therapies that might reduce the menopause symptoms, as well as to present the challenges faced by nursing professionals dealing with it.

METHODS

It is an integrative literature review, having a descriptive and exploratory approach. Data collection was guided by the six systematic steps of the integrative literature review,
The selection followed the four stages of PRISMA, in the first one, the articles were identified according to standardized descriptors as addressed by the Health Sciences Descriptors, so, in this stage 36 were found in SciELO and 109 in LILACS. Afterwards, there was the selection phase, where articles were excluded by time limit, title, and due to duplicity, then leaving 8 in SciELO and 35 in LILACS. In the eligibility stage, the texts were read in full, being excluded because they did not meet the guiding question and clarity of the content, totaling 6 in SciELO and 4 in LILACS. Therefore, a total of 11 studies corresponding to the two online databases were included.

The data selection and its analysis resulted in the following empirical categories: Alternative therapies indicated for reducing menopausal symptoms and Challenges faced by nursing professionals in regard to alternative therapies for menopausal symptoms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this integrative literature review, where data selection through the PRISMA diagram was used as an analytical basis (Figure 1), it was possible to initially identify a total of 145 studies in the selected databases (SciELO and LILACS). After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria established for this study, the sample resulted in 11 articles for analysis. The results of the articles evaluated are presented below to provide the reader with a better understanding of the analysis model proposed by this review, in order to achieve the objectives of this study.

The analyzed data point to a higher frequency of studies indexed in the SciELO database (54.5%), followed by LILACS (45.4%), among the selected studies. It can be seen that (100%) of the articles were published in national journals, in Portuguese, of which (36.3%) have an English version.

This leads us to infer that Brazil stands out as one of the countries that produces more research in this area, when considering the relationship between the variables, namely, alternative therapies and menopause. Which expands the applicability of such therapies within Brazilian collective health.

According to the analyzed articles, about (80%) of the authors state that alternative therapies, when performed correctly, have shown positive results in reducing the symptoms of menopause, contributing to a healthy life, as shown in Table 1.7–14

The table below presents the summary data of the studies included on alternative therapies for the treatment of menopausal symptoms, with regard to the following: authors, year of publication, journal, objectives, methods, results, and the main conclusions. The analysis shows a prevalence of publications in 2011 of (27.2%), followed by the years 2012, 2014 and 2016 with (18%), and 2009 with
Considering the area in which the studies were published, about (81.8%) of the publications are linked to nursing, which shows a prime interest of this professional category in investigating this theme, followed by (27.2 %) of studies published by the area of physical education. Both professional groups show an interest in alternative therapies associated with the menopause period.

Concerning the objectives, about (45.4%) seek to discuss and clarify the symptoms caused during the menopause/ climacteric period, with treatment strategies, and (36.3%) exclusively punctuate specific alternative therapies, which present evidence that may decrease menopausal symptoms.

With regard to the professional approach to the applicability of alternative therapies, about (17.2%) of the strategies are carried out by professionals linked to the multiprofessional team, specifically: physiotherapists, nutritionists, physical educators and speech therapists.

Oberving the methodological approach of research: (63.6%) are quantitative and cross-sectional studies, (27.2%) qualitative studies; (9%) quantitative and qualitative studies, and (9%) case studies. The search for the quantitative methodological approach can be associated with the probabilistic need to demonstrate the benefits of alternative therapies for the reduction of menopausal symptoms, according to the indicated therapy.

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**Table 1** - Summary of the included studies addressing alternative therapies for menopausal symptom treatment. Brasília city, Federal District, Brazil, 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Araujo AR, Chagas RKF, Lima ICS.</td>
<td>Alternative Therapies for Menopausal...</td>
<td>To analyze the knowledge of nursing undergraduate students concerning the use of medicinal plants as a complementary therapy in health care.</td>
<td>Qualitative study.</td>
<td>81.8% of the publications are linked to nursing, which shows a prime interest of this professional category in investigating this theme. The interest of this professional category is followed by physical education. Both professional groups show an interest in alternative therapies associated with the menopause period.</td>
<td>10.9789/2175-5361.2019.v12i2.1267-1273</td>
</tr>
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By reading and analyzing the articles, it was possible to gather them by the similarity of results in two thematic categories, which provided better clarification concerning the alternative therapies indicated for reducing menopausal symptoms, as well as the challenges of this practice for nursing professionals.

**Alternative therapies indicated for reducing menopausal symptoms**

The analyzed articles state that about (36.6%) of alternative therapies that correspond to physical activities, such as aerobic activity and walking have positive benefits concerning the reduction of menopausal symptoms, such as: heat, insomnia, depression and low self-esteem. In general, physical exercise can be an alternative of efficient use and low cost, by women with low socioeconomic factor.\(^7,11\)

Among the exercises that stand out is walking, which can be performed at flexible times, such as, reserving a specific time for the walk or gym.\(^7,15\)

Walking, as a physical exercise, is very important in several aspects, among which it helps in the reduction of almost all symptoms of menopause, also contributing to the comfort and improvement in the lives of women.\(^16,17\)

It was identified that acupuncture has (18.8%) effectiveness and brings positive results in the symptoms of insomnia and hot flashes, contributing to the generation of endorphins by the nervous system, tending to improve thermoregulation, generating a feeling of well-being.\(^18\)

Acupuncture is considered one of the most effective therapies in menopause, women do not have side effects, but rather additional benefits, such as increased body energy promoting an improvement in the immune system. The technique used in the acupuncture procedure is the placement of needles on the skin in strategic places. This therapy can also be indicated for other purposes.\(^18\)

Another therapy referred to as positive potential during menopause is aquatic exercise, about (9%) of the studies point to satisfactory results in body composition, strength and flexibility. It is noted that there is a decrease in depressive symptoms among women, observed in the pre and post-treatment performed in the swimming pool, through hydrotherapy.\(^12,19\)

Regarding the nutritional assessment, it can be said that a balanced diet containing healthy foods (especially foods containing proteins and calcium) is important to avoid problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and mood changes. Nevertheless, the results were worrisome, after analyzing the samples, considering that the research participants had an unbalanced diet, for more than body needs, being overweight, as calculated by the Body Mass Index and physical evaluation. This result points to a frequent potentiation of menopausal symptoms.\(^11,13\)

The fight against physical inactivity can be done through regular physical exercises, it fights diseases that worsen over time, such as: obesity, osteoporosis, cardiovascular diseases, anxiety, depression, and arthralgia. In the postmenopausal period, physical activity contributes to a reduction in bone resorption, which is marked at this time, which consequently reduces the risk of fractures.\(^10\)

The literature shows other alternative therapies, such as the consumption of phytoestrogens extracted from soy, which promotes a reduction in the number of hot flushes and vaginal dryness. There are contraindications, which must be observed and discussed, since the plants must be used correctly, with a medical prescription, as inadvertent use can cause harm, like any other type of medication. It should also pay attention to the guidelines on the form of use, its preparation and dosage for specific treatment according to the particularities of each woman.\(^14\)

Nowadays, there are two options for the pharmacological treatment of climacteric symptoms, synthetic Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and natural HRT with phytoestrogens. Phytoestrogens are natural substances that have similarities with endogenous estrogens, with a greater ability to interact directly with beta estrogenic receptors, conferring a better risk-benefit ratio in their therapeutic use, compared to synthetic HRT. Even when considering the advantages of synthetic HRT, many women stop treatment after the first year of use, due to irregular bleeding, nausea, weight gain, in addition to the fear of developing breast tumors.\(^8\)

Music therapy has been used to control insomnia, as it tends to decrease the symptoms of insomnia, providing improvement and mental comfort. The technique consists of a thirty-minute session of music therapy with classical music, after the session there are noticeable improvements in vital signs, generating a feeling of calmness.\(^20\)

The yoga technique has an average (9%) of positive results concerning menopausal symptoms, such as depression and insomnia, demonstrating effective improvements. The practices of yoga exercises promote the

**Table 1**

<table>
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<td>Acupuncture</td>
<td>Placement of needles on the skin in strategic places. This therapy can also be indicated for other purposes.(^18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquatic Exercise</td>
<td>Symptoms of menopause, women do not have side effects, but rather additional benefits, such as increased body energy promoting an improvement in the immune system. The technique used in the acupuncture procedure is the placement of needles on the skin in strategic places. This therapy can also be indicated for other purposes.(^18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hydrotherapy</td>
<td>Swimming pool, through hydrotherapy.(^12,19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutritional Assessment</td>
<td>Balanced diet containing healthy foods (especially foods containing proteins and calcium) is important to avoid problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and mood changes. Nevertheless, the results were worrisome, after analyzing the samples, considering that the research participants had an unbalanced diet, for more than body needs, being overweight, as calculated by the Body Mass Index and physical evaluation. This result points to a frequent potentiation of menopausal symptoms.(^11,13)</td>
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**Source:** It was originated by the summary of selected articles according to the PRISMA Diagram.

**Note:** The journals' names were kept as in their original language.
best flow of energy in the body, this allows relaxation that helps the patient to develop a greater sense of inner and outer balance.

The use of guided imagination is another technique that shows positive benefits in the symptoms of hot flashes, as it allows a release of relaxation from the body to occur, due to the practices of breathing and imagination exercises.21,22

Challenges faced by nursing professionals in regard to alternative therapies for menopausal symptoms

It is important to underline that (10%) of nurses have a direct contribution to the adherence and performance of alternative therapies by the group of women undergoing menopause, this professional guides, monitors and stimulates the entire therapeutic path, focusing on good practices, which are adapt to clients’ needs, with a focus on reducing menopausal symptoms.

Therapies such as yoga and music therapy can be performed by a nurse, as long as he knows and is trained to do so. One of the techniques that can be easily added is guided imagery therapy, widely used by nurses. Commonly, the nurse instructs the patient to close his eyes and breathe slowly, and with each slow exhalation the nurse instructs them to put an image into their mind that brings comfort to them. This technique promotes relaxation of the body and with each inspiration the patient imagines the positive energy. Such practice should be performed in a quiet environment.21,22

The challenges encountered in the application of alternative therapies by nursing are due to the lack of knowledge on the part of nurses, given their qualification for the development of such approaches, tending to generate insecurity in the face of practice; resistance in adherence by size of women is another limiting factor, due to the preference over the use of hormones, as it is an easily accessible and less effort method that the pharmaceutical market dominates.8,14

It is possible to deduce in general that alternative therapies cause loss of profit for the pharmaceutical industry, which discourages their application by large businessmen. Another conflicting point refers to the field of action of the nurse, where he faces difficulties in monitoring women in these alternative practices, as clients are often directed to another professional, such as the nutritionist or physical educator.14

Regarding the qualification process, it can be said that nursing professionals and other health professional categories, know little about alternative therapies, but this little is a stimulus to expand the field of study and applicability alternative therapies in the Brazilian setting.9

It is important to stress that there is a need to include alternative therapies, given the challenges identified by this study, within the permanent education programs in the large area of public health, which can address all health professionals.

Such actions have a positive potential in the health-disease process, provided that during professional training the governments and health associations support such alternative practices, in conjunction with the food industry, academia, and higher education institutions.9

CONCLUSIONS

Herein, the analyzes show effective results towards the reduction of menopausal symptoms through alternative therapies. The therapies described are as follows: hydrotherapies, physical exercises in general, use of medicinal plants, balanced diet, acupuncture, yoga, music therapy, and guided imagination. The main benefits are the reduction of depression, reduction in hot flashes, improvements in self-esteem, improvements in vaginal dryness, prevention of obesity, improvements in sleep disorders, more hydrated skin and hair, combating anxiety, among others.

The nurse participates during the recommendations, providing the monitoring and stimulation of such alternative practices so that they are adhered to by women who are experiencing the symptoms of menopause. The nurse’s contribution during treatment is evidenced as essential for its effectiveness. With regard to health professionals, the nurse is the one who has direct contact with the client, playing the role of mediator between the process of identifying symptoms and improving them, due to adherence to alternative therapy.

It is important to emphasize the need for the inclusion of teaching and qualification in alternative therapies within university education and permanent education programs in public health. Hence, it is suggested that alternative therapies may be included as a complementary support item within women’s health care programs and in other areas of life cycle care, as a favorable means towards health promotion.

REFERENCES


The authors claim to have no conflict of interest.