

Swan UPDATES

November 2007

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, in its newest work, Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause draws extensively on information from the SWAN study, and uses information published up to about 2 years ago from the study throughout the book. The Boston Women's Health collective is best known for publishing Our Bodies, Ourselves in the 1970s. It was the first book to present clear information and a frank discussion about many issues in women's health, including birth control and childbearing, from the perspective of empowering women to take control of their own health needs and concerns. The new book focuses on the menopause transition, and is entirely devoted to providing information about the menopause in the context of a woman's overall physical and emotional health. The book views the menopause as a natural process, not as a disease, and discusses the safe and effective medical and non-medical treatments for treating symptoms and concerns. The book Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause has been getting excellent reviews, and was quoted in the April 10, 2007, New York Times Health Section.

SWAN participants have been acknowledged numerous times and in numerous ways over the years for the importance of their participation in the SWAN. It often takes many years for the findings of research studies to become known and understood and widely accepted. It is encouraging to see SWAN making such a large and significant contribution to the understanding of women's health at mid-life. SWAN participants and researchers should be proud of the influence of their work.

One important perspective that the book puts forth is that women's concerns around the menopause transition should be viewed within the context of their busy lives. SWAN women frequently tell us about the pressures of work and family: about children leaving home, about taking care of elderly parents and friends becoming ill. We hear about women keeping themselves and their families healthy. We hear about women who have trouble sleeping and who worry that their memory doesn't seem to be as good as it once was. The new book Our Bodies Ourselves: Menopause has a lot of good advice and information to help women make sense of the physical and emotional changes they experience during menopause by recognizing and appreciating the various complexities of their lives.



We have highlighted three topics from the book that seem particularly relevant.

Mood

For more than 30 years, there have been differing opinions about whether mood changes during the menopausal transition. We have been able to improve understanding of whether negative mood symptoms, such as depression, tension, and irritability increase during midlife. We have found that most midlife women do not experience high levels of negative mood symptoms. Those that do are

more likely to experience these symptoms when perimenopausal than when premenopausal. Other factors contribute to high negative mood symptoms including hot flashes, financial strain, and low social support. This is consistent with other studies demonstrating that social, psychological, and health factors have as great or greater impact on negative mood as has the menopausal transition. Negative mood symptoms can range from mild to severe and can be helped with treatment. So, it is worthwhile to check with your physician if you think you are having distressing mood symptoms, especially if they are interfering with your life.

Bromberger JT, Meyer PM, Kravitz HM, et al., "Psychologic Distress and Natural Menopause: A Multiethnic Community Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 91 (2001):1435-42.

Libido

As women are transitioning into menopause, some wonder about changes in sexual desire and worry that the menopause might contribute to problems in sexual relationships. A quote from the book Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause states that "Our libido, or sexual energy, fluctuates throughout our lives. There is no agreement about whether sexual interest declines chiefly because of declining hormones, other aspects of aging such as poor circulation, or the influence of other life circumstances, such as quality of a woman's sexual relationship, her overall emotional and physical health, financial stability, and family and cultural values." Results from the SWAN have shown that even if libido declines, women can have satisfactory sexual lives after the menopause transition.

Cain VS, Johannes CB, Avis NE, et al., "Sexual Functioning and Practices in a Multi-Ethnic Study of Midlife Women: Baseline Results from SWAN," *The Journal of Sex Research* 40 (August 2003): (3) 266-76.

Sleep

Sleep is an important issue for women at mid-life. Sleep may be disrupted because of night sweats, trips to the bathroom, medical conditions, response to medications, stress, anxiety, depression, or as a result of consuming caffeine or alcohol. Many SWAN participants are also in a study of sleep, which will help scientists to learn more about sleep and sleep disturbances. Sleep may sometimes be improved by moderate exercise, practicing relaxation techniques, and getting more sun exposure. Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause includes a section about "sleep hygiene" and techniques to help women get a better night's sleep.

Kravitz HM, Ganz P, Bromberger JT, et al., "Sleep Difficulty in Women at Midlife: A Community Survey of Sleep and the Menopausal Transition," *Menopause* 10, no.1 (January 2003):19-28.

It is exciting that SWAN continues to contribute to greater understanding of women's health in the middle years, and encouraging to see the information from SWAN and other studies made available to women.

[HTTP://WWW.SWANSTUDY.ORG](http://www.swanstudy.org)