

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Menopause: The Complete Guide
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*, I'm Jeanne Blake. If you are a woman, you will experience Menopause. Menopause is not a medical problem, an illness or a disease. Many women experience symptoms during peri-menopause and menopause because of fluctuating hormone levels. It's co-authored by Barbara Kantrowitz, Newsweek's senior editor who writes about health and women's issues and Pat Wingert a correspondent for Newsweek who joins us here in the studio today. Pat thanks so much for coming in.

PAT WINGERT: It's a pleasure to be here.

JEANNE BLAKE: When I picked up this book I thought "wow." So I really, I don't always start an interview like this but I'm really interested in the genesis of this book because it really is for me not so much a book about menopause but really a book that any woman over the age of 40 or 45 should have on their bookshelf. It's about growing older as a woman.

PAT WINGERT: That's right. And doing it well.

JEANNE BLAKE: And doing it well. And in good health, exactly.

PAT WINGERT: Barbara and I have been reporters, I'm a reporter and Barbara's an editor and we've worked together at Newsweek for twenty years. Barbara has become kind of my quasi older sister. As I was approaching the end of my forties I called her and I said, you know, I read all those books before I got pregnant. I want to read a couple books before I start going through menopause and I want to know what to expect? So, what's the "what to expect for menopause?" And she said, you know, there isn't one. I have never found a book that I liked and I said well, maybe we should write it? And that's where the book started and we thought when the publisher called us and said well how many pages do you think it's going to be? You know, 200, 300, 400? We said well I don't know, let's see where this goes. The more we started reporting it, the more we realized that there were all these changes that took place well beyond what happens in your reproductive system and well beyond what happens in terms

of changes in your hormones. We thought women wanted a really comprehensive, state of the art, very balanced book that told them about all the changes that were going to take place from their thinning hair to why it hurts more to wear stilettos and so everything is in there.

JEANNE BLAKE: I actually have a few questions about this because the chapters are you know, sleep and joints and bones. It is the most comprehensive book for women and I did have, I didn't know that until I read this book that my joints and my bones, I know all about the bones but I didn't know that my joints were going to hurt as I got older but we'll talk about that in a minute. They don't so far, I hope it's because I'm keeping myself in good shape and exercising.

PAT WINGERT: We talk about all the symptoms that can happen.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right.

PAT WINGERT: But luckily, thankfully almost nobody experiences all of these and also not at the same time so even though we have all of that information in there, you may have some of these symptoms. You may have sore joints for a couple days and then they go away and then you don't have them again. You may have a mood problem for a couple weeks and then it goes away when you're dealing with it, you want to know about it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

PAT WINGERT: But hopefully these aren't. You see this list of all these terrible things that can happen.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's like wooooo.

PAT WINGERT: Screaming into the street but for most of us it's very manageable especially if we know what's going to happen.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly. Now you've made reference to the "What to Expect." For people who didn't catch the reference, that's the Workman series of books "*What to Expect When You're Expecting*." You say that as you set out to write that book and what surprised me

Pat is, as I read this, I really wondered why they gave it the title that they did? I mean it's a clever title, "*Is it Hot in Here? Or is it Me? The Complete Guide to Menopause.*" Why do you think that the book, I'm sure that you were in on choosing the title but I'm wondering why it wasn't referred to as a book about growing healthy and growing older as a woman?

PAT WINGERT: You know we struggled so much with the title, I think that was one of the hardest things to come up with.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's quite a statement on a how a many page book?

PAT WINGERT: This is almost a 600 page book.

JEANNE BLAKE: O.k. So that's quite a statement.

PAT WINGERT: It is, but what we finally decided is, every woman who goes through this phase says, "Is it Hot in Here? Or is it Me?" probably at least once a day. I know I say it. I've become a parody of myself and we wanted to also signal to women that not only was this a complete book but that we approached it with a sense of humor.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's great.

PAT WINGERT: Because as Erma Bombeck used to say, "If you can laugh at it, you can deal with it" and we really think it's important to bring some humor. In addition to this being a very scientific and very complete book, we have more than 50 cartoons through it. Victoria Roberts, a wonderful New Yorker Cartoonist did cartoons through the book so we wanted to kind of signal to women that we didn't take ourselves too seriously.

JEANNE BLAKE: Good.

PAT WINGERT: And that this was written with a little humor.

JEANNE BLAKE: I told a friend who has not yet gone through menopause that I was going to be interviewing you and that the book was about menopause and so I started talking

about you know, she was saying well you know what? What really is menopause? As I described the way I describe it, she said so it's sort of the reverse of puberty?

PAT WINGERT: That's right. In fact there's a cartoon in the book where there's a woman looking in the mirror and she sees herself with long braids.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yeah.

PAT WINGERT: Well it is, and you look at, there's a U shape graph in the book and when you see how menstruation starts and how it ends, it's a perfect L curve and we do go through the same things. I have a 17-year old daughter and we're really kind of going through opposite ends.

JEANNE BLAKE: Ah ha.

PAT WINGERT: Of the same experience. So when either of us kind of acts a little cranky or our hormones are fluctuating and we're not getting along we can approach it with more humor. Like I can say, I know where you're coming from and she understands where I'm coming from too and I think it's kind of helped us be a little stronger.

JEANNE BLAKE: I bet that's where the idea for what to tell your daughter came which is interspersed as are the jokes through the book.

PAT WINGERT: Right. Exactly. I mean, I kept, for example, on bones, nobody had ever said to me that we develop or maximum bone by the time we're 20. There's a little change between 20 and 30 but essentially as you are going through your teenage years you have to do the kind of things that will maximize whatever you're genetically processed or pre-determined bone density is. So many of us have daughters who are couch potatoes and if we knew, if we got them up and moving, we need to really ensure that they get as much bone as they possibly can because after 30, for the rest of your life, you're going to be drawing down on that bone. So, one thing, my daughter's very athletic but it's really a message that I wanted to share with other mothers.

JEANNE BLAKE: Now, you, in the Forward, Bernadette Healey, Dr. Bernadette Healey wrote the Forward which was wonderful that she did that. This is not our mother's menopause.

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Explain what she meant by that?

PAT WINGERT: I think part of it is that the Baby Boomers we've gone through every phase of our life. We've redefined it and I don't know about you, but my mother never said anything to me about menopause. When I was starting to approach this, I thought well this is the first person I should go to, right? So I went to her and said, you know what was menopause like for you and what should I expect? She was startled that I would ask her that question as if I was intruding on her privacy. But she really didn't have much to say about it.

JEANNE BLAKE: With us it's different because we do talk about much more openly.

PAT WINGERT: Yes. You know when Gail Sheehy did her book almost twenty years ago she didn't put the word menopause on the cover because the publisher thought it was too controversial. It was the most shoplifted book in the country that year because women didn't even want to go up the cash register to pay for it. They didn't want anyone to know.

JEANNE BLAKE: (Laughing) That is so funny.

PAT WINGERT: Whereas we are in a totally different,

JEANNE BLAKE: Smuggling a menopause book.

PAT WINGERT: When Barbara and I started working on this book I remember early on going to a party and one of my girlfriends said oh so what are you doing? I said, I'm starting this book on menopause and within a few minutes

JEANNE BLAKE: I was going to ask you about this.

PAT WINGERT: And within minutes, all of the women in the room were in the kitchen with me and all the men were in the living room and my husband said to me what are all doing in here? She's writing a book about menopause, get out of here, we have a million questions to ask her.

JEANNE BLAKE: You said in the book that it's a cocktail conversation killer.

PAT WINGERT: For men.

JEANNE BLAKE: But I wanted to ask you why? I mean it's not as though you wrote a book about you know, E.D.

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, what is it about the word menopause because I will tell you that yesterday I was with a couple I was interviewing their son and I started to talk about when I started to go through the phase of sleeplessness and I said it was because of menopause and there was a tension in the air.

PAT WINGERT: Yes, yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: What's that about?

PAT WINGERT: There is, you know, you start talking about menstruation in any of its form and it makes men want to flee from the room. I discovered that you know, like I said, I was a magnet for other women especially my age. If I was in a cocktail conversation with a man and it had gone on too long and I was trying to think of a way to gracefully exit, I would say well I was working on a book and they'd say what is it about and I would say menopause and they would flee! They would need a drink, they'd need to go to the bathroom, they couldn't get away from me fast enough.

JEANNE BLAKE: But you don't know what it's about is it just because it refers to you know, down there.

PAT WINGERT: And all that stuff that they don't want to know about.

JEANNE BLAKE: So when you get on an airplane and you want to not talk to the guy next to you say, you're working on a book?

PAT WINGERT: It's like my secret weapon and I say to other women when you're in this position just say you're working on a book about menopause and you're going to have all the privacy you want.

JEANNE BLAKE: You know, it's interesting to me that when you were, did you say 48 or 49?

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you called Barbara and you said, hey, you know, I need to have information so through this process what would you say that you were most surprised to learn that you didn't know?

PAT WINGERT: You know, it's funny, having written a lot of medical stories over the years, I thought, well I know more than the average woman going into this but actually there were tons of myths, things that I thought I knew that turned out to be wrong. One of them being, I thought every woman got depressed when she went through menopause.

JEANNE BLAKE: Really?

PAT WINGERT: Have really terrible mood problems. Well, you know, I think the image of menopause is up there with colonoscopies and route canals. I mean, it has a terrible public image and so I thought oh I'm just going to be really bitchy, that's what I was really afraid of and then I started doing the research and I discovered that you're actually much more likely to be diagnosed with depression before age 44.

JEANNE BLAKE: Sure.

PAT WINGERT: Than afterwards. When women were asked in their later years, what was the happiest decade of your life? Women were most likely to say 45 to 55. Well as you know, 51 is the average age of menopause. This whole image that it's the worst time of your life, is really wrong and a part of it is that our society values youth so much but you know you reach this part of your life, I don't know about you, but I've never felt better, I think I look better, I'm certainly smarter, I wouldn't want to go back to being a 20 year old. I like everything that's going on in my head.

JEANNE BLAKE: I wouldn't for anything. I wouldn't for anything. I actually probably feel the healthiest in every way.

PAT WINGERT: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: That I've felt and part of it is you learn to live better, smarter.

PAT WINGERT: Smart think, and you know who you are.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes.

PAT WINGERT: That makes a big difference too I think. You have more confidence about what you believe in. You're not afraid to stand up for your opinion anymore. You're not trying to please everybody anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. That's right.

PAT WINGERT: I think it's great. So that was a really pleasant surprise.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yeah, One thing that really surprised me about the book was among many things actually, was that you wrote so much about, I never would have taken a hormone. I thought hot flashes were the coolest thing in the world. As a medical reporter, can't you just hear the TV's clicking off for the guys that are watching and the women are cheering. But I was so fascinated that my body knew to do this thing right that I loved it. I enjoyed it and I remember telling my doctor because he said well, this was before 2002 was it when

PAT WINGERT: When HRT came out.

JEANNE BLAKE: A big bomb about estrogen and replacement, hormone replacement, but I remember my doctor saying do you want to talk about it? I'm like, why? I mean, this is cool. I'm enjoying this so far. It's absolutely no problem.

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: He said well that will change, just wait. And I didn't know what he meant. Then I hit an inability to sleep. I only found in reading your book, Pat, that it was because probably because of a drop in progesterone.

PAT WINGERT: Yes, well it could be a whole bunch of different things. I mean, sleep, it's too bad Barbara isn't here because sleep is her favorite topic but for a lot of us it can be a hormonal change, you know, when we, just before we have our periods a lot of times we notice sleep problems when we're going through the beginning of our periods. Certainly when we're pregnant a lot of us have sleep problems, so it can be hormonal but it can also be age. If you looked at a bar graph of what your sleep patterns look like when you were younger how much time you spent in deep sleep and how much time you spent in light sleep, you'd find that if you look at a comparable graph of someone older, they spend a lot less time in deep sleep and more time in light sleep.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right, but my sleeplessness, you described it. This, all of a sudden, boing, and just feeling like I was vibrating.

PAT WINGERT: Oh, in the middle of the night?

JEANNE BLAKE: It was horrifying.

PAT WINGERT: Waking up in the middle of the night?

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, horrifying and then not being able to go back to sleep and it wasn't about night sweats. It wasn't about hot flashes any of that it was just a brain thing.

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: It was, I mean, it was really awful for six months I became so sleep deprived that I just could barely get through the day. I mean it was. I would feel very emotional. I remember I left one of my, all my friends know this story. I had this, my favorite grey sweater, I loved this sweater. I got it on sale, okay it was very inexpensive and I left it in a cab in Washington, D.C. and that completely undid me. I think for a day I cried, "I want my sweater back" and my friends are like, it was a sweater, okay, and that's when I knew, okay, this is what the doctor was describing.

PAT WINGERT: Right. Well sleep, for everybody it's a little bit different and as you said for you it ends up being a very hormonal thing and, and when you go for too long with no sleep it just, it makes you slightly crazy.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's really bad.

PAT WINGERT: And it's, and so one of the things that we try to talk about in the book is all these things that you can do to try to compensate.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right. There are a lot of good tips in there about.

PAT WINGERT: And we're big believers that you should try to do lifestyle changes.

JEANNE BLAKE: Absolutely.

PAT WINGERT: Especially healthy changes before you try medication. Sleep medication as a general rule is okay for maybe a day or two. Maybe your mother passes away and you need some help getting to sleep but our big worry is that there's so many ads now on T.V. about sleep aids that if you start taking the stuff you may not address the underlying problem.

JEANNE BLAKE: Absolutely.

PAT WINGERT: Which may need to be addressed in a much more serious way. Because some sleep problems like apnea can really have an effect on your heart health and your longevity. So you really need to address those.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was really surprised to read in your book that, that a lack of sleep can contribute to heart disease and stroke, and even am I remembering this correctly? A higher incidence of diabetes?

PAT WINGERT: Right, it's really amazing and I think that Barbara and I have written a lot about sleep over the years. When you think about it we spend a third of our life doing, and yet for many, most older doctors probably got no formal training on sleep,. There's so many different sleep problems and if you can address them you can just live. You just feel so much better when you start getting really good sleep.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. And I've had a lot of people that have been, well, myself that go through a period of sleep deprivation and then get sleep they can't believe WOW I feel so different.

PAT WINGERT: Well, Barbara's best friend is the head of sleep medicine here at Beth Israel and for years Barbara was complaining about her sleep and when she was running a cover for Newsweek on sleep she dragged her into the sleep lab and said we're going to do a study on you, you can do a first person.

JEANNE BLAKE: I've always wanted to do that.

PAT WINGERT: So Barbara slept there and she woke up and she said to Jean Matherson is her name, Jean I had the best night's sleep I've had in years, even though she had all these probes all over her. Jean said, you know Barbara you woke up over 100 times last night. She raised to consciousness and she had no memory of doing any of this but you can imagine if you woke up a hundred times, no wonder Barbara's always exhausted.

JEANNE BLAKE: By the way, did she say why she was waking up?

PAT WINGERT: She had a respiratory, a sleep breathing problem that wasn't waking anybody else up. Barbara wasn't aware of it. If she had not had the testing, she probably never would have found it on her own but that's why we're really big believers that if you're really tired, day after day after day, if you're one of those people who just can't function without coffee or you need five coffees a day, you really should get this checked because it's not just that your not functioning as well as you should and your not feeling as well as you should but it could really effect how long you live. It could affect your heart and your brain it's really important to get it checked out.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's just one of the trillion of tips that are in the book. I want to go back to the issue of hormone replacement therapy.

PAT WINGERT: Sure.

JEANNE BLAKE: I have to say I was very much surprised that that there are still so many women that are using it.

PAT WINGERT: Right, right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Am I right, there still are?

PAT WINGERT: There still are. And it kind of it varies. I mean, there are, if you are a 40 year old who has had an early hysterectomy and you're having really bad hot flashes and you're concerned about your bone density, hormone therapy continues to be a good option for you. You would have had estrogen in your system until you were 51 on average anyway. You don't want your bones to start thinning before they have to. The risks associated with a 40 year old who doesn't have heart of heart disease, that doesn't have a, isn't at a high risk for breast cancer, are really very minimal. So for those women, it can be a very good choice. If you're a 52 year old woman and you're having hot flashes that are so severe that you can barely function, like I have a girlfriend in Washington who's a T.V. anchor, she sits under the lights she's the sole support of her family. She was getting these really bad hot flashes while she was trying to do her newscasts. For her it seems like a reasonable choice to take hormone therapy for a while.

JEANNE BLAKE: It reminds me of what's the movie with where the anchorman sweats so much.

PAT WINGERT: Oh yes, right, Broadcast News. And he apparently didn't have hot flashes but yes you don't want to turn into a river on air so for her that was a good choice but for somebody else who had more minor hot flashes, maybe some sleep problems. We would really suggest that they make lifestyle changes first because it's a two-fer. You start getting more exercise, you eat better, you sleep better, you start taking care of yourself you keep a diary so that you find out what are your triggers. For most of us there are certain things that trigger hot flashes.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

PAT WINGERT: And if we figure out what they are and we eliminate them or reduce them we're going to have fewer hot flashes. So that can be red wine, that can be spicy food, that can be too much coffee and it can especially be stress. If you keep track of what you're eating, what you're drinking and what you're experiencing when you have your hot flashes you may find a very natural way to reduce them and if at the same time you're getting more exercise, you're going to be looking better, you're going to be feeling better. Losing weight is another big one. They used to think that thinner women had more hot flashes than heavy ones turns out they were totally wrong. If you're heavier, you're more likely to have hot flashes partly because you're holding that heat in, the fat in your body is insulating yourself. It's harder to cool off.

JEANNE BLAKE: One more reason to maintain a healthy weight.

PAT WINGERT: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: You write about bioidenticals and they were a sort of a I don't know what you call them, fad, I guess I would call them. For a while and people, women hoped that they would be a replacement. You write that there's really, they're really not a good idea.

PAT WINGERT: Right, actually it came through with Suzanne Somers and then she did this other book that came out last year so it's all started all over again, you know there

are different kinds of hormones and you should definitely talk to your doctor if you are interested in hormones you should talk to your doctor about the options. There is a kind of estrogen that is very similar to the one that your body produces and that's been given this nickname bioidentical but there are FDA approved bioidenticals and even though the FDA is not a perfect agency and just because they approve it, doesn't mean the drug doesn't have any side effects. In fact, as we know, all drugs have some side effects. Bioidenticals, if you're going to do bioidenticals, that's the way to do it. What this fad became, this fad that Suzanne Somers was pushing was this idea that you take a bioidentical and you have a compounding pharmacy mix up a prescription made just for you and that you go in every month and the doctor determines how your hormone levels have changed and changes the prescription every month. Well, you know, there are virtually no endocrinologists who think that that's the way it happens. It's a very expensive way to do it.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was going to say cost prohibitive.

PAT WINGERT: Insurances don't cover it. Most of us have a hard time just doing what we absolutely need to do. The idea that we're going to go once a month to have our hormones checked just seems ridiculous and there's no scientific basis to do this. There are more than one kind of bioidentical and if you want to try that we really suggest that you do the FDA approved ones. We're seeing all this news now about the problems with pet food and human food even though the FDA is checking that stuff some bad stuff gets in there's no reason to take a medication that's not FDA approved unless there's no alternative.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you remember as a reporter years ago there was a supplement that was brought into the country and I want, it wasn't Melatonin but there was

PAT WINGERT: L Tryptophan.

JEANNE BLAKE: L Tryptophan. Exactly. Thank you. And I covered that as a medical reporter and that really awakened me to what I want to put into my body. I mean I take calcium and I take a daily vitamin but I'm super careful about others. I won't even call them medication, supplements that I put into my body.

PAT WINGERT: You know, it's funny, I did that story too.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did you?

PAT WINGERT: And that changed my mind about all of this too. I interviewed one of the women who was paralyzed for life.

JEANNE BLAKE: So did I.

PAT WINGERT: By taking L Tryptophan and you realize a lot of this stuff is coming in from other countries.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right.

PAT WINGERT: And you know, sometimes their manufacturing is not as high quality. Impurities can get into it. We never did know whether or not it was the L Tryptophan or some impurity that got into that medication but it was an alarm bell for a lot of us that you don't want to put anything into your body that hasn't been checked. You don't want to be taking any chances.

JEANNE BLAKE: I thought that because there was a family here that sued and it went to court I think that nationally there were families that sued and I thought that for sure there was an impurity maybe I'm just remembering that they suspected that.

PAT WINGERT: I'm not sure that they ever came up with an answer but for people who have covered that stuff for years, we see these stories all the time. I mean, I remember there was a Chinese herb that was really popular in Miami and it turned out it was Valium. You know, people were thinking oh, I'm taking something natural. Well, it wasn't and so you have to know as much as possible. You want to get something if you're going to take an herbal, you want to get it certified, you don't want to get something that you're not sure where it really came from.

JEANNE BLAKE: Absolutely. And I don't think that we should wrap up a program about menopause without talking about forgetfulness.

PAT WINGERT: What?

JEANNE BLAKE: I didn't want to forget to ask you that. That's why I wrote it down, okay. But there is something to it.

PAT WINGERT: Yes. Part of it is, there probably is a little bit of it that's related to hormones because women who have had a hysterectomy that included removal of their ovaries experience it more severely than those of us who go through it naturally. I think for a lot of us, when we get to mid-life there's so much going on, we're putting so much into our head.

JEANNE BLAKE: Exactly.

PAT WINGERT: We find ourselves going to the grocery store and not buying the thing that we went to the grocery store to get. We see a dear friend approaching us and we have no idea what her name is and we become fearful, we know we're getting older and we're thinking am I getting Alzheimer's? Is this the first sign of rough dementia and those things aren't. Those things happen to everybody.

JEANNE BLAKE: You offer those what's sort of a normal mid-life brain and then the abnormal forgetfulness. Normal forgetfulness, you write where you left something, forgetting to buy something at the store and forgetting somebody's name. The abnormal forgetfulness general confusion.

PAT WINGERT: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: Disorientation, or forgetting the way to a familiar place and not remembering a recent phone call or visit. Then you should talk with your doctor about it.

PAT WINGERT: You definitely should. In fact, one of my dearest friends who is about 60 just got diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's heartbreaking.

PAT WINGERT: At about 57. And it is, it happens rarely but it does happen and it is something that you need to be aware of because while they can't stop Alzheimer's there are medications that will slow it down so the earlier you pick up on it the better.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right.

PAT WINGERT: So, it is for a lot of us this is something that we probably worry about more than we have to but we go into a lot of detail in the book about what are good things to do for your memory and when you have to worry and when you don't.

JEANNE BLAKE: And I'll say it one more time, you go into a lot of detail about a lot of things. Pat, congratulations and tell Barbara that one day I'd love to talk with her about sleep.

PAT WINGERT: Alright, that sounds great.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay, once again the book is "Is it Hot in Here? or Is it Me?" "The Complete Guide to Menopause," published by Workmen Publishing and co-authored by Pat Wingert and Barbara Kantrowitz. Pat thanks so much for joining us.

PAT WINGERT: Thank you. It was fun.

JEANNE BLAKE: And thank you for joining us on *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake, I'll see you next time.