

HEATHER HIRSCH, MD '10, MS

Mythbusting Menopause

As a fellow in women's health at the Cleveland Clinic, internist Heather Hirsch, MD '10, MS, quickly zeroed in on one patient population that was particularly desperate for help—women in midlife and menopause. Despite menopause affecting half of the world's population at some point in their lives, the condition seemed widely misunderstood and Dr. Hirsch saw that patients were often inappropriately treated or not treated at all for sometimes debilitating symptoms having serious impact on quality of life.

"I was shaken that so many physicians did not have the right information to treat midlife and menopause and that women were often left on their own to find information," she says.

Determined to make a difference, Hirsch says she became passionate about educating women, physicians, residents, and medical students about menopause and midlife women's health. "When women get into their forties and their sex hormones change, that is the same time chronic diseases start to develop," she says. "I would argue that how someone takes care of you during your midlife is going to set up how you feel in your fifties, sixties, and beyond."

Today, Hirsch is clinical program director of a new Menopause and Midlife Clinic at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, a consultative clinic where she helps patients sort through issues related to their menopause or perimenopause. As a faculty member at Harvard Medical School, she also educates medical students, residents, and other physicians, and teaches continuing medical education courses.

Much of her effort is spent mythbusting about hormone therapy. "I always poll my residents. Many medical students are still learning that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is dangerous and should only be used as a last resort," says Hirsch, who completed a year of OB/GYN residency before switching to internal medicine. She says this belief lingers from early findings from the Women's Health Initiative study in the early 2000s that led to hysteria over the safety of HRT, despite ample evidence showing flaws in that study and its results. Hirsch believes significant data has subsequently demonstrated the safety and efficacy of HRT compared with other commonplace medications that can have serious long-term complications—including seizure medications, insulin, aspirin, and antibiotics. "For most patients, HRT is overall quite safe and certainly beneficial," she says.

Hirsch stresses she is referring to FDA-approved medications, not so-called compounded bio-identical hormones or implantable hormone pellets. "These are actually not bio-identical to anything, inconsistent in dosage, and you don't know what you're actually getting," she says.

A women's studies major as an undergraduate at Syracuse University, Hirsch believes there are three major reasons why there is such a void of knowledge surrounding menopause, arguments she laid out in a perspective article in the June 2020 *Journal of Internal Medicine*. First is the lack of evidence-based educational content taught on menopause in medical school and residency programs. "Both internal medicine doctors and OB/GYN's receive very little, if any, education on menopause," she says.

That leads to the second reason, which is steeped in ageism and sexism. "Menopause is socially charged. People don't talk about it. There's an attitude that hot flashes are annoying, but they're not going to kill you. It's just sort of pushed aside," Hirsch says.

And finally, the public is bombarded with information to sort through, and much of the information on menopause is outdated, inconsistent, and harmful.

Hirsch is doing her part to correct misinformation and educate a wider audience through both a podcast and YouTube channel, "Health by Heather Hirsch, MD," which covers topics related to midlife and menopausal health, including HRT, sexual health and libido, fitness, diet, sleep, and associated health issues.

"There are so many social and cultural implications to menopause, including unrealistic expectations of beauty, aging, and sexuality," says Hirsch, who presented a Grand Rounds on "The Swinging Pendulum in Menopause Hormone Therapy" at Upstate in 2019. "Not all women need treatment for menopause, but there's absolutely no reason for women to suffer with serious menopausal symptoms that compromise their quality of life and their health."

—Renée Gearhart Levy



Heather Hirsch, MD '10 is on a mission to expose and fill the gaps in women's health care, with a focus on midlife and menopause.