

Gynaecological and other health problems of postmenopausal women and their health seeking behaviour in rural Terai, Nepal

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Abstract

Background: There is very few data available in menopausal study done in Nepal. The data is even less on the various gynecological and medical problems post-menopausal women are suffering from. This study was done in Duhabi area, a community in Eastern Nepal, around the Comprehensive Health Service area of a community hospital under B.P Koirala Institute of Health Sciences. **Objective:** This study was done to document the various gynecological problems among the post-menopausal women and their relation with the socio-demographic characteristics. **Methods:** By using specific questionnaire, 234 post-menopausal women were interviewed regarding menopausal symptoms, other gynaecological problems and medical problems and their health seeking behaviour. **Results:** Our study showed that the most common symptoms among the post-menopausal women were loss of libido (53%) and hot flushes (41.5%). Other noted symptoms found were vaginal dryness (29.1%) and excessive vaginal bleeding (14.5%). The most common urinary symptoms were urgency (34.2%), dysuria (17.1%) and incontinence (17.1%). Uterine prolapse was reported by 6.4% of respondents. The most common medical condition seen in our study was low back ache (70.1%). Despite majority (62%) seeking medical treatment for their symptoms only 1.7% of the respondents were using hormone replacement therapy. **Conclusion:** The prevalence of gynaecological problems among the post-menopausal women was high in our study with the main symptoms of loss of libido and hot flushes. Majority of women with postmenopausal symptoms sought medical care for their problems.

Keywords: gynecological problem, health seeking behaviour, post-menopause

Introduction

Menopause is an important event in the life of a woman. Natural menopause is defined as permanent cessation of menstruation from the loss of ovarian follicular activity. Natural menopause is recognized to have occurred after 12 consecutive months of amenorrhea, for which there is no other obvious pathological or physiological cause.¹ The average age of menopause in the western world is 51 years whereas in India it is 44.3 years with a range between 45 and 55. In Nepal, mean age was 47 years in one study.²

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Although a universal phenomenon, it is a transitional period for women and can be perceived as unpleasant.³ This natural phenomenon often results in various psychological, somatic and urinary symptoms which impair the overall quality of life of women.⁴⁻⁶

The symptoms of menopause are multiple and differ from one study to another. For some the symptoms may be severe enough to disturb their daily life while to others it may be mild.⁷ Menopause is not a disease but the symptoms and their severities which are mainly subjective can be very challenging.

The physical symptoms commonly associated with menopause include weakness, internal heat, waist pains, “false pregnancy”, general body pain, shrinking of the body, dizziness, sweating, restlessness, unhappiness and urinary incontinence. Vaginal symptoms reported include dryness, discomfort, itching and dyspareunia. Sexual problems, particularly loss of libido and primary sleep disorders are widespread in this group of women.⁸

Many studies have been conducted related to various aspects of menopause. But majority are confined to the awareness pertaining to menopause and related aspects. In our study an effort has been made to find out the symptoms prevalent in postmenopausal women and associated health seeking behavior in the same population in the community.

The main objectives of this study were to identify various gynecological & common health problems among postmenopausal women & their health seeking behaviors and to find out the relation of socio-demographic characteristics & gynecological and common health problems.

Methods

For the purpose of the study Comprehensive Health Service Area (CoHSA), a community hospital under the Department of Community Medicine, B.P Koirala Institute of Health Sciences was taken. The participants were postmenopausal women living with their husband around the study area. Two hundred thirty-four people were selected by snowball sampling technique, with the study being carried out between 1st of March to 31st of March 2014. Data was collected by face to face interview method with postmenopausal women living with their husbands. Semi-structured questionnaire was used to obtain maximum information.

The nature of research was explained to all of the participants, and verbal consent was taken from each of them before the data were collected. The data was first entered into Microsoft Excel and later analysed in SPSS 17. Frequency table and simple percentage were shown with the help of

charts and diagrams. Chi square test was used for selected variables to see the relationship with the dependent variables.

Results

The socio-demographic profile of the study subjects is given in table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)		
Less than 55	139	59.4
55-64	65	27.8
65+	30	12.8
Religion		
Hindu	206	88
Others	28	12
Ethnicity		
Brahmin/Chhetri	77	32.9
Tharu	62	26.5
Muslim	25	10.7
Others	70	29.9
Literacy		
Literate	77	33
Illiterate	157	67
Occupation		
Home maker	183	78.2
Agricultural worker	25	10.7
Others	26	11.1
Age at marriage (years)		
Less than 15	44	18.8
15-17	85	36.3
18 and above	105	44.9
Age at first birth (years)		
Less than 18	57	24.4
18 and above	177	75.6

The distribution of urinary symptoms reported by the subjects is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of urinary symptoms

Urinary problems	Number of subjects	Percentage
Dysuria	40	17.1
Incontinence	23	9.8
Retention	41	17.5
Urgency	80	34.2

Loss of libido and experience of hot flushes were the main postmenopausal symptoms. Excessive vaginal discharge and vaginal dryness were

present only in small percentage of the women. (Table 3)

Table 3: Menopausal symptoms

Symptoms	Number of subjects	Percentage
Excessive vaginal discharge	34	14.5
Vaginal dryness	68	29.1
Loss of libido	124	53
Hot flushes	97	41.5

Other less common problems reported by the postmenopausal women included gynecological malignancy (4.7%), pain during coitus (6.8%) and post coital bleeding (1.3%). Surprisingly only 6.4% of the respondents reported of uterine prolapse.

Among the non-gynecological problems 70.1% of the women had low back ache and 14.1% had dyspnea. Other coexisting medical problems like hypertension, DM were present in 56.8% of subjects (Table 4).

Table 4: Medical problems in post-menopausal women

Medical problems	Number of subjects	Percentage
Low back ache	164	70.1
Dyspnea	33	14.1
Kyphosis	4	1.7
Per rectal bleeding	4	1.7
Other medical problems	133	56.8

The study also tried to see the socio-demographic characteristics association with various gynecological symptoms. There was significant association between age and loss of libido. Similarly there was also significant association seen between age and urinary urgency. (Table 5)

Table 5: Association of age with menopausal symptoms

Age (years)	Characteristics	Yes	No	P Value
Less than 55	Loss of libido	55	84	0.000
55-64		44	21	
65 and above		25	5	
Less than 55	Urgency	38	101	0.04
55-64		33	32	
65 and above		9	21	

Table 6: Relation of ethnicity with vaginal discharge

Ethnicity	Characteristics	Yes	No	P Value
Brahmin/Chettri	Excessive Vaginal Discharge	15	62	0.049
Tharu		6	56	
Muslim		0	25	
Others		13	57	

Another part of the study was to see the health seeking behavior among the post-menopausal women. Majority (69.2%) followed personal hygiene as a means to relieve the symptoms and 51.3% were involved in physical activities. Only small number was taking hormone replacement therapy. Of all, 62% sought modern medical care for their symptoms (Figure 1)

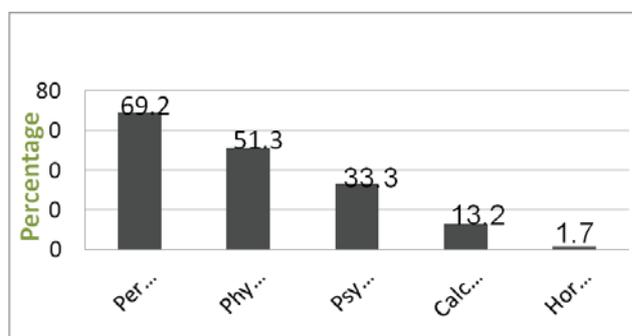


Figure 1: health seeking behavior

Discussion

Menopause is an inevitable natural process that occurs in all women towards the end of the reproductive age. Besides the menopausal symptoms women in this period are also vulnerable to suffer from various gynecological problems which are not often taken into account. The present study undertaken to see the gynecological problem among the postmenopausal women found out that the majority had loss of libido (53%) followed by vaginal dryness (29.1%) and excessive vaginal bleeding(14.5%)

In our study we found out that there was increased loss of libido (53%). This is slightly different from one of the study done in Nepal where the incidence was 76%.⁹ However in another study done by Dasgupta and Ray, loss of sexual desire was found in 90.8 % of women in rural areas compared to 94.3% in urban.

Again this difference can be first attributed to the fact that the study was done in the hospital setting where patient were seen by female doctors only.¹⁰

With regards to the vasomotor symptoms there is much variation. In our study the main symptom was found to be hot flushes (41.5%). A study from Bangladesh reported it's incidence as 35.8%.¹¹. Another study done in Pakistan showed it as high as 66.3%.¹². And there is much variation in other study from around the globe with incidence ranging from 17.6% to 55%.¹³⁻¹⁵

In the medical problems experienced were mostly low Back pain (70.1%) and dyspnea (14.1%). Similar findings were also seen in other study done among the Asian and the Caucasians women.^{16,17}

Another aspect of our study was to see the health seeking behavior among the post-menopausal women, as women in this part of the world are reluctant to speak about these issues, some even considering it as a taboo. We found out that the majority of people preferred modern medical treatment while 11.1 % sought help from the traditional healers. This result is almost similar to study done in Nigeria about utilization of health care services.¹⁸. However despite the high percentage of people resorting to the modern medical services, hormone replacement therapy was only minimal, contrast to other studies with as high 34%.¹⁹ This may be because of the fact that most people go the pharmacies and people are not trained regarding use of the hormone replacement therapy.¹⁹

Most common menopausal symptoms seen was loss of libido followed by vaginal dryness/irritation. Many patients had urinary symptoms in the menopausal age group. However, despite high incidence of uterine prolapse cases in the national data, only 6% were found to have prolapse cases. This might have been due to social stigma associated with the disease.

The current study, thus, attempted to know the symptoms of respondents with menopause. There

may be many false beliefs regarding menopausal symptoms among the rural women. Such studies help in creating awareness since disseminating health education for postmenopausal women is of prime importance in country like ours with high illiteracy and people not open to discussing about post-menopausal symptoms.

Conclusion

Women around the globe have diverse experiences of menopause based on various biological, psychological, social and cultural factors which shape their perception, values and attitudes to menopause. The present study clearly shows high prevalence of post-menopausal symptoms and of other gynecological problems in our study setting. Most common menopausal symptoms seen was loss of libido followed by vaginal dryness/irritation in our study population. The incidence of loss of libido was associated with increasing age.

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