



# All about YOU

By combining conventional medicine with alternative therapies, many women have discovered a better way to manage major life stages such as childbirth and menopause.

By HEATHER MILLAR

**W**hen it comes to taking care, we women are renowned for putting ourselves last. But according to Dr Christiane Northrup, a holistic physician trained in obstetrics and gynaecology, and

author of *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* (Bantam, 2006), it's only when we make our health a priority that we can take responsibility for our bodies. By listening to our intuition, and combining that with the best advice and

intervention that western medicine can offer, we can achieve the best outcome for ourselves.

"Our own body is the best health system we have," says Dr Northrup, "if we know how to listen to it." ▶



**“The experience [of childbirth] has left me with such respect for my body”**

IMAGE: PHOTOLIBRARY

# FROM BIRTH TO LIFE

It was intuition that led Lindy Schneider to make the choice to have a natural birth at home.

“I had a deep sense of knowing that a home birth was right for me,” says Lindy, 37, from Warburton in Victoria. “I use natural therapies and am proactive about health-related issues, so this naturally carried into decisions regarding pregnancy and birth.”

At first, her partner Tex wasn’t so sure – he was conscious of ensuring the safety of Lindy and the baby should anything go wrong. So early on, the couple looked at the family birth centre of a major public hospital. However, after they started birth classes and began to talk to midwives, Tex began to see the benefits in having a home birth.

“I was overwhelmed with excitement,” says Lindy. “We engaged two private midwives and started planning.”

Throughout the pregnancy, Lindy used homeopathy, acupuncture and osteopathy to prepare herself for the experience. She was 14 days overdue when labour started.

The first contraction began in the morning, and Lindy and Tex spent the day relaxing, watching TV and meditating.

“Instead of focusing on pain, I focused on the power that was surging through my body, with the knowledge that with every contraction my baby was a little bit closer,” Lindy recalls.

The midwives arrived at around 8.30pm that night and by then Lindy was already fully dilated and ready to go.

Hannah was born an hour later in a birthing pool in their lounge room.

“The experience [of childbirth] has left me with such respect for my body. It has a brilliant system of pain management and euphoria that medicine cannot replicate.



IMAGE: PHOTOLIBRARY

## According to Diabetes Australia, from three to eight per cent of pregnant women will develop gestational diabetes around the 24th to 28th week of pregnancy

“We are expecting our second child early next year and I am looking forward to experiencing the home birthing process once again.”

Although Lindy had a positive experience, not all women are so lucky. Jo Bates, 34, is one such person, having suffered with gestational diabetes throughout her pregnancy.

“When I got the call telling me my blood sugar was high, I was absolutely mortified,” says Jo. “I had no idea how to control gestational diabetes and I was terrified that I would do something to hurt my developing baby.”

Gestational diabetes occurs during pregnancy and usually goes away after the baby is born. According to Diabetes Australia, from three to eight per cent of pregnant women will develop gestational

diabetes around the 24th to 28th week of pregnancy.

“I had never heard of it before and I became very frustrated with the lack of information available about the condition, and with the lack of direction given by my doctor.

“I desperately wanted to learn more about gestational diabetes and talk to other women with the same condition. I was forced to take matters into my own hands, spending the better portion of my remaining pregnancy searching the Internet and gathering information, trying to understand and take control of the condition.

“Ultimately, I was able to control this condition with a healthy diet and regular exercise. The great news is my baby was born perfectly healthy.”



## WOMEN AND STDS

Sexually transmitted diseases are an area for concern for both men and women. In particular, there has been an explosion in the rate of chlamydia infections in Australia – rates rose by 13.8 per cent in 2006, with women recording higher rates of infection than men.

“The lifetime risk of a young woman catching chlamydia is probably approaching 30 per cent or more,” said Professor Basil Donovan from the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research at the University of NSW, who compiled the report.

The sexually transmitted disease, which can lead to infertility, poses a challenge for screening programs as 80 per cent of infected women are asymptomatic.

On a positive note, Professor Donovan’s report showed rates of syphilis and gonorrhoea were not rising in women, and that rates of transmission of hepatitis C and HIV were relatively stable in recent years.

With regard to herpes, according to research conducted at the University of Sydney, 12 per cent of Australian adults are infected with herpes (that’s one in eight people); and Australian women are twice as likely to carry the virus than men.

# THE MID-LIFE EXPERIENCE

## Perimenopause

Perimenopause is the phase before menopause, where the menstrual cycle begins to slow down. You may experience menopause-like symptoms such as bloating, hot flushes, and insomnia.

Carol Handy, 41, started perimenopause about four years ago, and found natural remedies, exercise and meditation have been powerful tools in controlling her symptoms.

"In the last year, I started having very bad palpitations and hot flushes, depression and anxiety," she says. "I decided to try acupuncture and Chinese herbs, as I've had endometriosis all my life – what an improvement!"

Carol also swears by walking, and "in addition, meditation has really helped, even if it is just 20 minutes a day.

**"What a woman experiences depends upon a multitude of factors, from her heredity, her expectations and her cultural background to her self-esteem and her diet"**

"Interestingly, the things I've been doing for my unbalanced hormones also work for my son, who is going through adolescence."

## Menopause

Dr Christiane Northrup recommends women look at menopause as a process during which they can create the healthy body they need to last until the end of their lives.

"What a woman experiences depends upon a multitude of factors, from her heredity, her expectations and her cultural background to her self-esteem and her diet," she writes in her book

*The Wisdom of Menopause* (Hay House, 2007).

"The ideal path through the change is one that uses the best of western medical knowledge concerning hormone metabolism, bone density and heart health, combined with the complementary modalities of the east, from meditation to acupuncture to herbs."

Pamela McCoy, 62, has had a lifetime of difficulty with her health, and has carried a great deal of anger at a medical system that denied her the opportunity to take responsibility for her own health and wellbeing. She was 20 when she first gave birth, and almost died in the process. Her heart stopped and she recalls leaving her body and hovering above herself, aware of everything the doctors and nurses were saying and doing.

"No-one believed me of course," she says. "They thought I was mad!"

"I was told not to have any more children, because of the complications, but no-one actually told me what those complications were – not fully. You were just supposed to trust the doctor back then and not question too much."

Pamela suffered from terrible PMT and period pains for years.

"I was so angry – I would lie in bed thinking about how I could kill people."

The doctors diagnosed her with depression and put her on an antidepressant, but Pamela ►





knew they were on the wrong track. She worked in a pharmacy and was gradually gathering information to take responsibility for her health.

"I stopped taking the antidepressant, and started taking natural supplements – B6 and B12 – and started adjusting my diet."

At 38, she started bleeding every day, and went to see the doctor. She wanted a

happens over a period of several years, allowing the body to adjust. Many women who undergo a natural menopause will report physical and emotional changes, but for the most part, these changes are either tolerable or easily managed. This is not the case with menopause brought on by surgery, which normally comes on fast and furiously.

## With natural menopause, the body gradually transitions from higher hormone levels to lower hormone levels. This progression happens over a period of several years

hysterectomy, but the doctors told her she was too young, and might still want to have children, despite having been told years earlier that she shouldn't have more children. Six years later, she was given the operation.

"Again, I had terrible anger at being told I was too young, when I was in such pain and discomfort – for years! It seemed what I wanted didn't matter – the doctors held all the power."

After the hysterectomy, Pamela's situation improved dramatically, but she still had the hormonal changes brought on by the surgery to deal with.

With natural menopause, the body gradually transitions from higher hormone levels to lower hormone levels. This progression

Hormone levels plummet, shocking the body into chaos.

Pamela's doctor recommended she go on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which she found helped tremendously. She was on it for 12 years (which is much longer than is usually recommended).

"I tried coming off it earlier several times, but I felt terrible – non-sexual, unwell, anxious. So I went back on it – up until I had a breast cancer scare. Then it was time to stop taking it."

In recent years, Pamela has had something of a rebirth. She has entered "a calm and peaceful phase of my life". She continues to take supplements, and has gradually adjusted her diet over the years as she has become

more aware of her body's needs. She reports never having felt better.

Many women suffer from psychological and physical upheaval during menopause, just as Pamela did. So how do treatments for menopause affect women's long-term health and wellbeing?

According to the Jean Hailes Foundation, a leading women's medical centre in Melbourne, the symptoms of menopause – hot flushes, vaginal dryness and sleep disturbances – may be improved through short-term use of hormone therapy, but the centre does not advocate its long-term use.

HRT has been shown to reduce the risk of osteoporosis by preventing bone loss, and evidence from a major trial shows that it reduces the risk of colorectal cancer. However recent trials suggest HRT may cause other health issues, and that women with established coronary heart disease should avoid HRT. 🌈

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

★ Dr Christiane Northrup, *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* (Bantam, 2006) and *The Wisdom of Menopause* (Hay House, 2007)

★ Dr Sarah J. Buckley, *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering* (One Moon Press, 2005)

★ Diabetes Australia – [www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)

★ Jean Hailes Foundation – [www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)