Epidemiologic Survey of Menopausal and Vasomotor Symptoms in Korean Women

Sun Kyoung Yum, M.D., Ph.D.1, Byung-Koo Yoon, M.D., Ph.D.2, Byoung Ick Lee, M.D.3, Hyoung Moo Park, M.D., Ph.D.4, Tak Kim, M.D., Ph.D.1

1Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Korea University Anam Hospital, Korea University College of Medicine; 2Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, Seoul; 3Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Inha University College of Medicine, Incheon; 4Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Chung-Ang University Hospital, Chung-Ang University College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

Objectives: Vasomotor symptoms (VMS) are one of the most annoying symptoms experienced by postmenopausal women. Generally, 75% of women over 50 years of age experience VMS. This study is an epidemiologic survey of menopausal symptoms and VMS in Korean menopausal women.

Methods: Survey participants were recruited from Korean provinces based on the Korean population study conducted in 2010 and using multi-level stratification by age and geographic location, and random sampling. Healthy perimenopausal and menopausal Korean women aged between 40 to 60 years and who participated in the interview survey were included in the study. The Korean version of the Menopause Rating Scale (MRS) and the Korean version of Women's Health Questionnaire (WHQ) was used to investigate the prevalence of menopausal related symptoms and to assess quality of life.

Results: Among the 1,500 women, 66% were classified as perimenopause, 28% as menopause, and 7% had undergone hysterectomy. Typically, 41.6% of women in perimenopause reported having experienced VMS in recent six months. About 53.1% of women in early menopause and 36.5% of women in late menopause had experienced VMS in the past six months. Whereas, 30.6% of women with hot flashes, and 27.9% of women with sweating stated that these symptoms were not related to menopause.

Conclusion: The prevalence of VMS in Korean women seems to be less than women of Western countries. Overall subjective experience of menopause was perceived as increasingly positive with age. Awareness of menopausal symptoms appeared lower than expected. Perimenopausal and menopausal women in Korea rarely sought medical care. (J Korean Soc Menopause 2012;18:147-154)

Key Words: Facial flashing, Menopause, Perimenopause, Sweating, Vasomotor symptoms
Although menopause is a normal process of aging in women, it is nevertheless a significant event in a woman’s life, accompanied by decrease in sex hormones and resultant physical and psychological changes.1

At the Stage of Reproductive Aging Workshop (STRAW) in 2001, menopause was defined within a seven stage of classification of a woman’s reproductive aging. Reproductive stage was defined as the time from menarche to menopausal transition. Impending menopause amidst regular menstruation was termed as premenopause, which progressed to a stage of irregular menstruation, called as perimenopause. When menses has ceased for more than twelve months, a woman has entered the stage of postmenopause.1,2

Menopausal symptoms have individual variability in their presentations. These symptoms can be classified by the time of presentation into acute, subacute, and chronic. Acute symptoms include vasomotor symptoms (VMS) such as facial flashing and night sweats, insomnia, and depression. Subacute symptoms are mainly associated with uterovaginal atrophy. Chronic symptoms or sequelae of menopause include osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disorder, and sexual dysfunction.3,4

VMS are the most common of the menopausal symptoms, experienced by 35–50% of women during perimenopause and 30–80% of women during the menopause stage. Overall, 75% of women over 50 years of age experience VMS. The duration of VMS is usually 1–2 years, although some women can experience it for even more than ten years.

In a survey conducted by the Korean Menopausal Society in 2001, of the 797 menopausal women (sample group), 89% had experienced menopausal symptoms, of which facial flushing was most common in 61% of women.5,6 A Gallup study of menopausal women in the United States (US) reported the four most common reasons for seeking medical care as facial flushing, night sweats, mood disorders, and insomnia.7

The etiology of VMS is thought to be the decrease in systemic estrogen and symptoms are most prominent during early menopause when estrogen levels fall acutely. The symptoms usually last for 1–2 years, but in 25% of women, VMS continue for 5 years, and can extend beyond 10 years in about 10% of menopausal women.5

With increasing life expectancy, postmenopausal stage will also increase in length in a woman’s lifecycle, According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) health data (2008), Korean women’s life expectancy is 82.4 years. This is 13th of the 30 member countries, surpassing the group average of 81.7 years. The average age at menopause for Korean women has been reported to be 49.7 years.8 Assuming that these numbers are not grossly erroneous, an average Korean woman will spend about 30 years and more than a third of her life in the post-menopausal stage. Needless to say, we can expect that an increasingly greater proportion of our clinical visitors will be the elderly. Beforehand, we need to be more familiar with the physiological and psychological changes as well as the medical need, which the menopausal women require.

Ethnic differences exist in the experience of menopause. According to Spector’s definition of ethnicity,8 which is a cultural group’s sense of identification associated with the group’s common social and cultural heritage, Korea is homogenous in ethnic composition.

This study aims to complement the information gathered from previous studies conducted on Korean menopausal women, with an emphasis on subjective experiences, to help the clinicians to better understand the women’s journeys through menopause.

Materials and Methods

1. Study participants

Healthy perimenopausal and menopausal Korean women between the ages of 40 to 60 years were included in the study. Survey participants were recruited from four Korean provinces, Seoul, Busan, Daegu, Gwangju, and Daejeon. The percentage of each province was decided according to the Korean population study conducted in 2010. We used multi-level stratification based on age and geographic location, and then conducted random sampling.

The study included both clinician diagnosed as well as self–diagnosed women with perimenopause or menopause. Diagnosis of perimenopause was based on cessation of menses for less than 12 months, showing variation in menstrual cycle that exceeds 7 days from one’s normal