



Mary Smith was 52 when she first noticed symptoms of menopause in 2000. But a bout of hot flushes passed quickly and Smith, a grants administrator for British Arts, soon presumed the worst was over.

In 2004, though, the flushes returned with a vengeance; this time she could suffer 30 a day, along with lack of energy, poor concentration and mood swings.

"I'd be at meetings when suddenly I'd become totally infused with intense heat," she recalls.

"No sooner had I got over one flush than the next would come. I always felt hazy and under par."

The average age at onset of menopause is 51, and doctors say that about 50 per cent of menopausal women will be sufficiently troubled by symptoms – hot flushes are among the most common – to seek some form of treatment. GPs typically prescribe hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

Smith, however, didn't find relief at the hands of a GP, but in a rising alternative treatment: facial reflexology.

Developed by the Danish reflexologist Lone Sorensen Lopez, the discipline borrows the central tenet of traditional reflexology – that areas of the body are "reflected" in the foot – and applies it to the face.

The result is a treatment that looks like a face massage but, by targeting the right areas, proponents claim it can help to alleviate digestive complaints, migraines and muscle tension, as well as menopause symptoms.

Smith's menopause symptoms were troublesome for her not only because of their severity but because of her lifestyle.

A fitness enthusiast, Smith combines regular gym visits with weekly yoga and Pilates sessions.

Now, hot flushes and the attendant tiredness was making all that too difficult.

"They were constant," says Smith. "At work I was endlessly taking deep breaths and drinking glasses of water. At night they stopped me sleeping. My energy was so low that trips to the gym, and evenings at the theatre, became less frequent. After a while I started to wonder if I'd ever get over it."

A fan of natural health, and very keen to avoid HRT, Smith didn't visit her GP. Instead, at The Vitality Show, a London fair for natural health products, she met facial reflexologist Nikke Ariff.

To develop facial reflexology, its inventor combined reflexology with South American face massage and the work of the Vietnamese acupuncturist Dr Bui Quoi Chua.

As with acupuncture, reflexologists believe that channels, called meridians, flow through the body, carrying "chi" or energy.

By targeting these meridians in the foot or face, reflexology claims to deliver health benefits.

Smith had her first session in June 2005 at Ariff's clinic in Central London. After giving a detailed medical history, and removing her makeup, Smith lay down for the treatment.

Ariff explains her technique: "I spend 10 minutes working on 35 acupuncture points on the face by massaging them lightly with my finger-tips. This helps rebalance the body's natural energy via the meridians, and improves circulation. It's extremely relaxing, too."

Next, Ariff began to search Smith's face for signs that parts of the body were not functioning well.

Here she uses firm, slow strokes to feel the lower layers of the skin.

"An imbalance in the body manifests itself in the face as a deposit that feels like a grain of rice, or, if it is more chronic, porridge.

"In Mary, I found those deposits along the nose and the top of the cheeks; these are some of the areas that relate to the stomach and spleen."

Ariff then stimulated the points on the face that relate to stomach and spleen.

"Facial reflexology is about restoring the balance of the body; relief from symptoms follows from that."

Smith says the treatments, which lasted about 50 minutes, felt wonderful: "I became incredibly relaxed. And that night, I slept better than I had for years."

After a summer holiday in July, Smith saw Ariff again twice last month.

"By the third session, my hot flushes had reduced to just one or two a day," she says.

By session five, they had almost completely disappeared. It was such a relief."

"If safe alternative treatments work for a particular patient, that's great," says Dr John Stevenson of the Royal Brompton hospital, a menopause expert and chairman of the charity Women's Health Concern.

"But if you're a woman troubled by these symptoms, make your GP your first port of call. No treatment has been proven to be anywhere near as effective as HRT."

"Would my hot flushes have gone anyway, and so quickly?" asks Smith, who had monthly sessions with Ariff until March of last year.

"I don't think so; I'm convinced the treatment worked. I haven't had a hot flush for nearly a year. And I've got my energy back. I'm back at the gym, and recently I've been taking my granddaughter on trips to the London museums. That was just too draining before Nikke's treatment." – The Times

Not just a face lift

FACIAL reflexology is a massage treatment that proponents claim brings health benefits to the whole body. They say that massaging specific points on the face can help rebalance the body's "chi" or energy. Practitioners say it can help to alleviate a variety of conditions, including irritable bowel syndrome, muscle tension, stress and anxiety, migraines, and symptoms of menopause. It is claimed that children with ADHD can also benefit.