

Health tip: Understanding Menopause



In the United States, over one million women reach menopause each year. Menopause is a life transition that effects each person differently. Most women experience perimenopausal symptoms, anatomical changes, and emotional changes throughout the transition.

Menopause

Going 12 months without a menstrual period is called menopause.² Menopause may happen between ages 30–50, or even later. Most people experience menopause at the age of 51. Menopause can result from a natural decline of hormones, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, or primary ovarian insufficiency. While it is impossible to predict when exactly menopause will occur, family history may give you a good idea of when you might experience this life change.^{3,4}

Perimenopause

In the years leading up to menopause, changes within the ovaries cause estrogen levels to drop. Decreased estrogen is what triggers many of the uncomfortable perimenopausal symptoms to occur throughout the entire body. During these years, ovulation becomes irregular, menstrual periods become irregular, energy consumption decreases, fat cells enlarge, weight gain occurs, bone density decreases and changes to the body's shape become noticeable. This transition period is Perimenopause.²

Perimenopause usually happens between ages 45–55 and is often a gradual process. Perimenopause typically lasts around 4 years, but it may last from 2–8 years. It is important to note you may still become pregnant during this time.^{1,2}

Symptoms

Nearly 75% of all women experience physical, mental and emotional changes during perimenopause.⁵ These may include:

- Irregular periods
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Sleep disturbances
- Mood changes
- Dry skin
- Thinning hair
- Changes in breast tissue
- Vaginal dryness
- Bladder changes

Facts to know:

Hot flashes or flushes are, by far, the most common symptom of menopause. About 75% of all women have these sudden, brief, periodic increases in their body temperature along with an increase in heart rate and perspiration.³

Suggestions for symptom management include:

- Dressing in layers
- Avoiding foods like spicy foods, alcohol, coffee, tea and hot beverages
- Drinking something cold when a hot flash begins
- Stress management
- Using light sheets and clothing at night
- Keeping a diary to look for triggers

Medical Management

It is important to talk to your doctor when you notice symptoms. Many of the uncomfortable symptoms associated with perimenopause may be treated with medications.^{1,6}

Some of the common medications used to treat perimenopausal symptoms include low dose hormonal birth control, menopausal hormone therapy, non-hormonal medications like anti-depressants, some blood pressure medications, and over the counter medications that help with headaches and muscle aches. Another type of medication is called a “SERM”, which stands for Selective Estrogen Receptor Modulator. These non-hormonal medications help modulate estrogen levels, which helps alleviate symptoms.

Decreased bone density also puts women at risk for osteoporosis. Some women will need to take medications that help with bone health, like calcium, Vitamin D, and certain injectable medications.

Keep in mind that while menopausal hormone therapy helps relieve symptoms, it increases the risk of serious side effects including cancer, blood clots and stroke. Because many of these medications come with serious side effects, it’s recommended to speak with your doctor about which approach is best for you. Some non-medical management options include maintaining a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables, practicing good sleep hygiene, getting regular exercise program, and support groups.^{1,6}

Post-Menopausal Health

After menopause, women’s health needs change. The lack of estrogen and progesterone puts post-menopausal women at greater risk for high cholesterol, heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, urinary incontinence, and oral issues.⁷

Let’s take a closer look at each of these topics:

- **Heart Disease:** Estrogen helps keep blood vessels relaxed and flexible and, also helps your body maintain healthier cholesterol levels. Therefore, low estrogen may cause cholesterol to build up in your arteries, which could lead to heart disease.
- **Osteoporosis:** Lower estrogen levels cause your bones to become less dense, which may lead to osteoporosis. In turn, this may cause your bones to become brittle and break more easily.
- **Urinary Incontinence:** With lower levels of estrogen in your body, your bladder and vaginal tissue may change, causing a range of symptoms and increased risk of urinary infections. You may prevent UTI’s by drinking plenty of water and by going to the bathroom whenever you have the urge to do so.
- **Weight gain:** Finally, Some women will experience weight gain during or after menopause. During the menopause transition, the change in hormones can lead the body to store more fat and burn calories less efficiently. To balance this, do your best to exercise regularly, consume a healthier diet, reduce stress and sleep well.

In summary, menopause is a normal part of aging that all women will experience as they grow older. Symptoms usually start between ages 45–55 and may be managed with lifestyle changes and medications. You should talk to your doctor when you start to notice any symptoms and be sure to stay connected to care as you age and your health needs change.

Sources:

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