

MENOPAUSE

What is Menopause?

Menopause is a natural event that normally occurs in women usually between the ages of 45 and 55. It is the transition period in a woman's life when her ovaries stop producing eggs, her body produces less oestrogen and progesterone, and menstruation becomes less frequent, eventually stopping altogether.

What causes it?

The symptoms of menopause are caused by changes in estrogen and progesterone levels.

In some women, menstrual flow comes to a sudden halt. More commonly, it slowly stops over time. During this time, the menstrual periods generally become either more closely or more widely spaced. This irregularity may last for 1 - 3 years before menstruation finally ends completely. Before this, the cycle length may shorten to as little as every 3 weeks.

What are the symptoms?

Every woman experiences the menopause differently. Some experience one or two symptoms, which may be mild, while others have more severe or troublesome symptoms.

The most common symptoms of menopause include:

- Heart pounding or racing
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Skin flushing
- Sleeping problems (insomnia)

Other symptoms of menopause may include:

- Decreased interest in sex, possibly decreased response to sexual stimulation
- Forgetfulness (in some women)
- Headaches
- Irregular menstrual periods
- Mood swings including irritability, depression, and anxiety
- Urine leakage
- Vaginal dryness and painful sexual intercourse
- Vaginal infections
- Joint aches and pains
- Irregular heartbeat (palpitations)

How is it diagnosed?

Blood and urine tests can be used to measure changes in hormone levels that may signal when a woman is close to menopause or has already gone through menopause. Examples of these tests include:

- Estradiol
- FSH (Follicle stimulating hormone)
- LH (Luteinising hormone)

Hormone tests are not necessary to diagnose menopause. The diagnosis may be based on symptoms.

A pelvic exam may indicate changes in the vaginal lining caused by declining estrogen levels. The doctor may perform a bone density test to screen for low bone density levels that occur with osteoporosis. The rate of bone loss increases during the first few years after the last period.

How can Menopause affect my health?

You are likely to notice the symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes and mood changes.

Low mood as a result of the menopause is different from depression. Antidepressants are not helpful unless you have been diagnosed with depression. Hormone replacement therapy and some psychotherapy may assist with low mood.

Decreased oestrogen levels are also associated with the following long-term effects:

- Bone loss and eventual osteoporosis in some women
- Changes in cholesterol levels and greater risk of heart disease

There is also an increased risk of developing osteoporosis and cardiac disease in later life. Osteoporosis can lead to broken bones if not treated.

Postmenopausal bleeding may occur. This bleeding is often nothing to worry about. However, your health care provider should always check any postmenopausal bleeding, because it may be an early sign of other problems, including cancer.

Treatment

Treatment with hormones like estrogen and/or progesterone may be helpful if you have severe symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, mood issues, or vaginal dryness.

Discuss the decision to take hormones thoroughly with your doctor, weighing your risks against any possible benefits. Learn about the many options currently available to you that do not involve taking hormones. Every woman is different. Your doctor should be aware of your entire medical history before prescribing hormone therapy (HT).

If you have a uterus and decide to take estrogen, you must also take progesterone to prevent endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus). If you do not have a uterus, progesterone is not necessary.

Hormone therapy

Several major studies have questioned the health benefits and risks of hormone replacement therapy, including the risk of developing breast cancer, heart attacks, strokes, and blood clots.

Current guidelines support the use of HT for the treatment of hot flashes. Specific recommendations:

- HT may be started in women who have recently entered menopause
- HT should not be used in women who started menopause many years ago; an exception is an estrogen vaginal cream
- The medicine should not be used for longer than 5 years
- Women taking HT should have a baseline low risk for stroke, heart disease, blood clots, or breast cancer

To reduce the risks of estrogen therapy and still gain the benefits of the treatment, your doctor may recommend:

- Using a lower dose of estrogen or a different estrogen preparation (for instance, a vaginal cream rather than a pill)
- Having frequent and regular pelvic exams and Pap smears to detect problems as early as possible
- Having frequent and regular physical exams, including breast exams and mammograms

HRT is available as oral tablets, skin patches, injections, body gel or spray, or vaginal ring, creams or pessary.

Alternatives to Hormone therapy

The good news is that you can take many steps to reduce your symptoms without taking hormones: (See steps to reduce symptoms – below)

Your role in managing this condition

Menopause is a natural and expected part of a woman's development and does not need to be prevented. However, there are ways to reduce or eliminate some of the symptoms of menopause.

You can reduce your risk of long-term problems such as osteoporosis and heart disease by taking the following steps:

- Control your blood pressure, cholesterol, and other risk factors for heart disease
- Do NOT smoke. Cigarette use can cause early menopause
- Eat a low-fat diet
- Get regular exercise. Resistance exercises help strengthen your bones and improve your balance
- If you show early signs of bone loss or have a strong family history of osteoporosis, talk to your doctor about medications that can help stop further weakening
- Take calcium and vitamin D
- Visit your doctor annually and discuss your ongoing requirement for HRT at each annual visit

You can take many steps to reduce your symptoms without taking hormones:

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and spicy foods
- Dress lightly and in layers
- Eat soy foods
- Get adequate calcium and vitamin D in food or supplements
- Get plenty of exercise
- Perform Kegel exercises daily to strengthen the muscles of your vagina and pelvis
- Practice slow, deep breathing whenever a hot flash starts to come on (try taking six breaths per minute)
- Remain sexually active
- Use water-based lubricants during sexual intercourse

Disclaimer

The reader should always consult a doctor if they believe they may be suffering from this medical condition. The information contained herein is intended to assist understanding and should not take the place of your doctor's advice or instructions. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained herein, Universal Care does not accept responsibility for any errors or omissions or their consequences, and shall not be liable for any damages suffered arising out of the use of this information.

Copyright Universal Care Pty Ltd

