

Menopause



MENOPAUSE

Menopause is the time when a woman's periods cease. It is a natural part of every woman's life and usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55.

Whether running a business, reaching top of the career ladder, rearing a busy family or living quietly, the menopausal woman needs to plan for her present and future health.

There is considerable information available about menopause and women can now make informed decisions when adjusting to the next phase of their life.

EXPLAINING MENOPAUSE

Menopause is when the production of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone gradually declines. Ovulation becomes less frequent and finally stops. Periods can stop suddenly or change in amount and frequency until they cease.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms can occur for several years, sometimes five or more, before the periods stop. This is called perimenopause, or the time before menopause. Some women have few or no symptoms at menopause. The symptoms can vary widely and include:

- hot flushes
- light headed feelings
- irritability and mood swings
- depression or anxiety
- unloved feelings
- poor memory
- sleeplessness or change in sleep pattern
- unusual tiredness
- joint and muscle aches and pains
- new facial hair
- palpitations (sudden fast heart beats)
- unusually dry skin or a crawling sensation in the skin
- less sexual desire
- vaginal dryness or discomfort during intercourse
- bladder frequency or loss of bladder control
- headaches
- weight gain.

Hot flushes during menopause may be experienced as a prickly sensation, a red face or neck, sweating or an all-over hot feeling. After the sensation passes the woman may feel a chill. Flushes often happen at night and can deprive women and their partners of necessary sleep. These flushes along with sleeplessness, unusually dry skin and vaginal dryness are due to oestrogen deficiency.

Some women have altered moods and anxiety during menopause. Hormonal changes always affect the vaginal lining, which gradually becomes thinner, drier and less elastic. The moisture that lubricates the vagina is no longer produced in sufficient amounts which can make intercourse uncomfortable. It may also be more vulnerable to damage and infection. A lubricant or oestrogen cream can alleviate this problem.

Some women pass urine more frequently or experience pain when urinating, even though they have no infection. Other women find that urine leaks out when they sneeze, cough or exercise. This is called stress incontinence and is caused by the weakening of the pelvic floor muscles. Special exercises can strengthen them or a continence physiotherapist can be consulted.

You should see your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- bleeding which lasts more than 8 days
- bleeding after you have had no periods for 6 months or more
- very heavy bleeding.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF MENOPAUSE

There are some effects of menopause which may have a profound effect on a woman's health in later life.

Osteoporosis

After menopause the lack of oestrogen causes bone tissue to lose calcium. This can lead to osteoporosis in some women. Osteoporosis can be prevented with oestrogen replacement therapy together with calcium supplements. Your risk of osteoporosis can be assessed by a simple bone density test.

The best protection against developing osteoporosis is regular weightbearing exercise, a calcium-rich diet from an early age, and oestrogen replacement at menopause.

Heart disease

Before menopause very few women have heart disease. The lack of oestrogen after menopause leads to changes which can lead to the development of blocked arteries in the heart. Eating a healthy diet and controlling weight gain at menopause helps to prevent heart disease. Oestrogen may help to prevent the development of heart disease but it does not seem to help after heart disease has already developed.

PLANNING FOR FUTURE HEALTH

Menopause is a time to take stock of your health and plan for a healthy second half of life. You can help yourself by taking a few simple steps and making some changes in what you eat or how you exercise.

Diet

Ensure you have a balanced diet with small, regular meals that are reasonably high in fibre and calcium while being low in fat and sugar. This will help prevent menopausal weight gain. Avoid too much salt, caffeine and alcohol.

Eat plenty of low-fat or non-fat dairy products which are higher in calcium than full-cream varieties. If your diet is low in calcium, i.e. less than 1000mg daily, you may need to take calcium supplements.

Exercise

Try to exercise daily. Weight bearing exercises are good for your bones and can be achieved by walking briskly for thirty minutes or joining a gym. Aerobic exercise, such as aerobics, swimming and brisk walking are also advised as it raises the pulse rate and is good for the heart. Pelvic floor muscle exercises will also help prevent incontinence.

HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been developed over the last fifty years and is an important part of your menopause planning. It can be beneficial, for the immediate symptoms of menopause and to help prevent the long-term effects. It is important to discuss the therapy fully with your doctor so you understand the risks and benefits of treatment.

Replacing hormones can reduce the unpleasant effects of menopause like hot flushes. Vaginal oestrogen creams are particularly helpful for vaginal discomfort and urinary symptoms. There are many different preparations available and there will be one that suits you.

There are some conditions where hormone replacement needs to be adjusted to suit an individual, or in some cases, even avoided. This applies to people who may have a past history of blood clots, severe liver disease and/or cancer of the breast or uterus. Your doctor may ask you to get specialist advice.

Hormone replacement is not a contraceptive. This may be an issue in early perimenopause and alternative methods of contraception or taking a low dose pill, is advisable. Your contraceptive needs can be discussed with your doctor, the Family Planning Association or Women's Health Care House.

Further information and assistance

Your nearest Women's Health Centre

Rosalie Gollan Centre for Women's Health

Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital

Telephone: (08) 9346 4014

Menopause Clinic

King Edward Memorial Hospital

Telephone: (08) 9340 1355 or (08) 9340 2222

Wednesdays, by appointment only.

A doctor's referral is needed.

Women's Health Care House

(Northbridge)

Telephone: (08) 9227 8122

Appointment required.

Family Planning Association of Western Australia (Inc.)

Telephone: (08) 9227 6177

Mid-life and Menopause Support Group Inc.

Telephone: (08) 9340 1535

Country Callers Freecall: 1800 629 799

Health Direct

Freecall: 1800 022 222

Other brochures within the
Women's Health Information Series include:

Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercises

Osteoporosis

Postnatal Anxiety, Stress and Depression

Premenstrual Syndrome

Sexuality After Your Baby

Physiotherapy Before and After Childbirth

To order any of the resources
contact **HealthInfo** on

1300 135 030

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