

WOMEN'S FACT SHEET

UNDERSTANDING & DEALING WITH THE MENOPAUSE



What is the Menopause?

The word menopause 'strictly' means a woman's last menstrual period, which typically occurs around the age of 51 and defines the end of the fertile phase of a woman's life. The 'change of life' or 'climacteric' is the time when your body is adjusting before, during and after the menopause. There are hormonal changes and symptoms in the years leading up to and beyond your final menstrual period. It has been estimated that, by the age of 54 years, most women (80 per cent) have their last menstrual period – they are then termed postmenopausal.

Some women experience a natural menopause before the age of 40. This is considered premature. Menopause can be induced prematurely by radiotherapy or chemotherapy used to treat some cancers, or following surgery to remove the ovaries. In such women hot flushes and sweats can be particularly severe.

Symptoms of the Menopause

Most, but not all, symptoms of the menopause are directly related to fluctuating oestrogen levels. Irregular periods are usually the first sign that signals the menopause. As the ovaries become erratic in their production of oestrogen and progesterone, so your menstrual cycle becomes irregular. At first your cycle typically shortens from its usual 28 days to between 21 and 25 days. Later on, it lengthens, with occasional skipped periods. Your period itself can change, sometimes it may be very heavy and last longer than usual, at other times it may be scanty and short. You should use adequate contraception until a year or two after the final period.

Hot Flushes and Night Sweats

Hot flushes and night sweats are hall mark symptoms of the menopause, affecting about 75% of women. Flushes often start around the age of 47 or 48 and usually continue for three or four years. In the early stages of the menopause they may occur only in the week before menstruation, when oestrogen levels are naturally low. Eventually oestrogen levels fluctuate sufficiently throughout the cycle so that flushes happen at any time. Flushes reach their peak during the first couple of years after the last menstrual period and then ease over time. In some women flushes start earlier; for some it happens in their late 30s or early 40s. Flushes can continue for 5 or 10 years; 25% of women will have occasional flushes for more than 5 years.

Symptoms of the Menopause

There are many symptoms associated with the menopause, mainly caused by changes in the levels of oestrogen in the body. Fortunately, most women do not suffer from all the symptoms.

- Anxiety
- Changes to skin & hair
- Depression
- Disrupted sleep
- Loss of interest in sex
- Dry vagina
- Fatigue
- Palpitations of the heart
- Poor concentration
- Hot flushes & night sweats
- Urinary problems
- Irregular periods
- Irritability
- Joint & muscle pain
- Painful intercourse
- Headaches
- Poor memory

Disrupted Sleep

Symptoms such as night sweats are not the only reason for disrupted sleep. Such symptoms can also be a symptom of underlying anxiety or depression. Anxiety usually causes difficulty getting to sleep – you feel extremely tired but your mind keeps ticking over the events of the day or you worry about the future. Depression is more often associated with early morning waking – you get to sleep without too much trouble but wake in the early hours tossing and turning until it is time to get up.

As the hormonal changes of the menopause can aggravate underlying anxiety and depression, you should seek help from your doctor for specific medical treatment for these conditions, particularly if you have successfully controlled other symptoms of the 'change'.

Headaches

Fluctuating hormone levels can trigger migraine and other headaches in susceptible women. During 'the change', women notice an increasing link between headaches and their monthly periods. Premenstrual symptoms, that is, occurring a week or two before a period, become more prominent at this time of life and both migraine and non-migraine headaches can worsen during the premenstrual week. Headaches usually improve when hormonal fluctuations settle after the menopause.

Joint and Muscle Pains

Aching wrists, knees, ankles and lower back pain are common and may be confused with arthritis.

Painful Intercourse

Oestrogen stimulates the production of mucus, which keeps the vagina and other sexual parts moist. After the menopause, lack of oestrogen means that less lubricating mucus is produced. The vagina becomes shorter, less elastic and dryer. As well as intercourse becoming more painful, these changes can result in itching and irritation.

Loss of Libido

Sexual desire frequently lessens with the menopause and it often takes longer to become aroused. Sexual desire is also affected by general well-being, emotional upsets and painful intercourse.

Urinary Symptoms

A sudden need to urinate even when you have just been to the toilet is a common problem after the menopause; lack of oestrogen causes the tissue around the neck of the bladder to thin. Also the muscles become weaker. Coughing and running can provoke an embarrassing leak of urine. Recurring urine infections are also more common as the skin around the bladder becomes thinner and drier.

Dry Skin and Hair

Oestrogen keeps the skin moist and stimulates hair growth. Without oestrogen your skin becomes dry, losing its suppleness so that wrinkles become more prominent. Hair growth slows, but the rate of hair loss stays the same so your hair becomes thinner and less manageable.

Dry Eyes

As well as skin becoming drier after the menopause, many women notice that their eyes become persistently dry and itchy as fewer tears are produced.

Weight Gain

Women may put on weight because of reduced physical activity. As we age our bodies burn up energy more slowly than when we were younger, which can lead to weight gain.

Emotional Symptoms

Poor sleep has a knock on effect resulting in daytime tiredness, lethargy, difficulty concentrating and depression. These symptoms are often very distressing and make it even harder to cope with daily demands.

Non-hormonal Symptoms

Depression and sexual problems around the menopause are not just the results of falling levels of oestrogen. The menopause marks a time in a woman's life that can be difficult for many reasons it may coincide with children leaving home, impending retirement and marital difficulties, ill or dying parents. These changes take their own toll and you may need professional support. You should then contact your GP

Postmenopausal Risks

The menopause has taken on much greater importance over recent years, particularly in western society because with life expectancy over 80 years and rising, many women can expect to be postmenopausal for over one third of their lives. Although the symptoms of the menopause are not life threatening, the long term effects of oestrogen deficiency can be. The major diseases of old age are heart disease, strokes, breast and bowel cancer, osteoporosis & fractures and dementia. All these are affected by oestrogen so women with a premature menopause are at particular risk. Although these conditions do not always result in death, they may lead to a significant reduction in quality of life, for both the individuals affected and their relatives.

HELPING YOURSELF TO FEEL BETTER SIMPLE MEASURES ARE WORTH TRYING

Flushes and Sweats

Keep cool – flushes can be caused by eating spicy food or hot drinks such as tea and coffee. Drinking cold drinks and using a fan can help. Wear natural fibres and allow air to circulate around the skin and layer thinner clothes rather than wearing one thick sweater. Use cotton sheets or duvet covers. Sleep in a cool room with adequate ventilation.

Exercise

Physically active women experience fewer and less severe flushes than sedentary women.

Lose Weight

Being overweight predisposes to more frequent and severe flushes.

Stop Smoking

The more a woman smokes, the more flushes she is likely to have.

Relax

Slow controlled breathing can reduce the severity of a flush when performed as soon as a flush begins.

Disrupted Sleep

Avoid stimulating food and drink near bedtime, particularly alcohol, try a warm milky drink instead. Have a warm bath and read a book, watch TV until you feel sleepy but beware of thrillers and other stimulating programmes.

Irregular Periods

As periods become more irregular, they often also become heavier and more painful. Mild period problems can be helped by gentle exercise or heat but heavy, painful periods often require specific treatment. Visit the doctor as heavy periods can lead to anaemia, boost iron intake with iron-rich foods such as meat and spinach or with iron supplements.

Headaches

Headaches can be caused by missed meals, lack of sleep or muscular pain. Migraine headaches can arise from similar triggers so help reduce frequent attacks by eating regularly and getting enough sleep. Simple painkillers or over the counter migraine treatments help to control symptoms but follow the instructions and do not take them for more than a couple of days a week. More frequent use can exacerbate the problem. If headaches do not respond to simple measures, see a doctor.

Joint and Muscular Pains

Deep heat creams and gels or pre heat-pads can give some relief but painkillers, such as paracetamol, or anti-inflammatory drugs, such as aspirin or ibuprofen. If these are not effective, seek advice from your doctor. Try gentle non-weight bearing exercise such as cycling or swimming. Losing weight can reduce the load on the joints. Fish oil supplements and glucosamine may help.

Vaginal Dryness

If vaginal dryness is the only problem, lubricating gels may help.

Loss of Libido

Sex drive lessens naturally over the years and it takes longer to get aroused. Whereas younger women may become sufficiently aroused for penetrative sex in as short a time as a few seconds, menopausal women may take five minutes more. Taking time during sex, with lots of foreplay, enables the Bartholin's glands to produce the maximum amount of lubrication before penetration

Urinary Symptoms

Simply crossing the legs when you feel a cough or sneeze starting can help to prevent leakage. Eat plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and fibre to avoid constipation, which can cause pressure on the bladder and urethra.

Strengthening the Pelvic Floor Muscles

Being over weight puts stress on the pelvic floor muscles. These muscles provide support to the bladder. They are weakened by childbirth and are further weakened by oestrogen deficiency after the menopause. Strengthening the muscles can help reduce leakage. Try pelvic floor exercises.

Urinary Infections

Do not restrict the amount of fluids that you drink as this can worsen the problem by increasing your susceptibility to cystitis because harmful bacteria are less likely to be urinated away. But do cut out coffee, strong tea and other caffeine-rich drinks such as fizzy cola, which stimulates the bladder muscle. Cystitis may respond to treatments from the chemist containing sodium citrate, which makes the urine less acidic. Alternatively, drink cranberry juice or water with a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda added which also makes the urine less acidic. If symptoms continue consult your doctor.

Dry Skin and Hair

Keep to a simple haircut that is easy to manage and use conditioner to stop your hair becoming too dry. If you are out in the sun, use an effective sun cream and wear a hat. If you swim regularly wear a swimming hat and apply plenty of moisturiser after showering, as chlorine is very drying to both skin and hair.

Dry Eyes

Women frequently experience problems with dry eyes as they enter the menopause. Many women find relief simply from using artificial tears that can be bought from a pharmacy. There are various choices. Avoid products that whiten the eyes – they do not have adequate lubricating qualities and often make the problem worse. Drink more water – drinking eight to ten glasses of water spaced over the course of each day keeps the body hydrated. Blink frequently especially when working at a computer or watching television. Avoid rubbing the eyes as it only worsens the irritation.

Weight Gain

Increasing evidence suggests that postmenopausal weight gain is nature's way of producing more oestrogen. After the menopause a certain amount of oestrogen is formed in fat, so the fatter you are the more oestrogen you produce. This may explain why, in general, fat women have stronger bones than thin women. Obviously, a balance is necessary because obesity is linked to heart disease.

Emotional Symptoms

Most of us have felt low at some time in our lives. Usually it is the result of a particular event and these feelings eventually ease with time. Hormonal changes can make it harder to cope. Finding ways to relax and unwind, eating healthily and taking adequate exercise will all help improve your mood? Limit consumption of alcohol because it can aggravate depression.

Source: Bibliography, British Medical Association, Understanding the Menopause.

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