

Supporting women through menopause

This fact sheet explains what menopause is and the types of symptoms women may experience. It also covers how women can be supported through menopause.

What is menopause?

Menopause is a woman's final menstrual period. It is a normal and healthy part of ageing. A woman has had her menopause if she has no period (bleeding, spotting or staining) for 12 months. For most women menopause happens between 45 and 55 years of age, but it can happen earlier or later, up to around 60 years. Levels of the hormones oestrogen and progesterone decline during this time, which means the ovaries no longer release any eggs. A woman can no longer get pregnant after menopause.

Menopause sometimes occurs earlier if a woman has some types of cancer treatment, surgery or may happen for unknown reasons.

Symptoms

Not all women will have symptoms and for those who do, they will be different for everyone.

Symptoms of menopause can include:

- hot flushes, night sweats, feeling hot
- vaginal changes such as dryness and pain during sex
- joint or muscle aches and pains
- mood swings, such as low mood, anxiety or irritability
- sleep disturbance
- a feeling of crawling or itchy skin.

Perimenopause

In the lead-up to menopause (called perimenopause), women may have irregular periods, hot flushes, mood swings and other symptoms.

This typically starts when a woman is in her 40s, but can begin earlier. Symptoms can come in waves, increasing and declining for months at a time. Perimenopause usually lasts 4-6 years, but can be as short as a year, or last more than 10 years.

Supporting women going through menopause

Knowing about the process of perimenopause and menopause can help you, your family and your relationships.

All women respond differently to menopause and for some, it can have a major impact on their lives. As well as the symptoms she may have, it may affect how she feels about herself.

This life phase can be difficult for both the woman and her family. Some things partners and families can do to help are:

- open and supportive communication – this can help to maintain a strong relationship during this time
- letting her sleep alone when necessary – some women prefer this due to the hot flushes and other sleep issues that can accompany menopause. This can help everyone sleep more comfortably.

Managing symptoms

Treatments may help some symptoms, but the changes that menopause brings will still occur. Some things a woman can do to feel good through the menopause include:

- Take care of general health. Have regular check-ups with your GP and talk to them about how you are feeling with a check-up for both partners
- Aim for a healthy lifestyle (both of you). Eat healthily. Be physically active. Don't smoke. Don't drink alcohol, but if you do, don't drink too much. Take care of your emotional wellbeing
- For some women who have bothersome symptoms, the most effective treatment is menopause hormone therapy (MHT – formerly called hormone replacement therapy, or HRT). You should talk to your doctor about your options, your family history and your own health history. In general, for women under the age of 60 when starting MHT, the benefits outweigh the risks. There are many different therapies available; one may suit better than another
- There are a number of other ways including lifestyle changes, natural therapies and medications for women who have mild symptoms and don't want to, or can't take, MHT. Speak to your GP, or another doctor who specialises in women's health, about any symptoms or concerns you have.

Sex and menopause

Some women may notice changes to their sex life around menopause. Physical changes may make sex uncomfortable for a woman because the hormonal changes can make her vagina very dry. Other changes including lower libido (sex drive) may mean she does not feel like having sex as much, or at all.

Couples can find other ways to stay close and connected. If having penetrative sex, make sure you use a good quality lubricant designed for women. Your doctor will be able to talk through any concerns you may have.

Workplace support during menopause

Just as managers recognise that employees may need special considerations during major life events such as pregnancy, cancer treatment or bereavement, so too should menopause be recognised as a period of big life changes. As well as understanding and support, some women may need work adjustments and greater flexibility to help manage their symptoms. Some tips for a menopause-friendly workplace include:

- reassuring women that they do not need to hide their symptoms. This helps to maintain optimal job performance
- supporting women in seeking treatment for symptoms
- adjusting the work environment to handle symptoms such as hot flushes by having climate control adjustable for different office areas, bringing in electric fans, opening windows
- having somewhere for women to store a change of clothes in case they need to change due to excessive body heat or sweating
- adopting more flexible working practices and hours.

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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