



Yarning about menopause

What is menopause?

Menopause is the last period or monthly bleed. You have reached menopause when you have not had a period for 12 months in a row. After menopause you cannot have children naturally.

When does menopause happen?

Most women reach menopause between the ages of 45 and 55 years, but the average age is 51 years.

What happens before menopause?

In the months (and sometimes years) before menopause the ovaries are running out of eggs and an egg might not be released each month so the period is not very regular.

Why does menopause happen?

When you are born all your eggs are already inside the ovaries and by the time you reach menopause there are no eggs left. Some eggs are released each month before the period and the rest of the eggs disappear. This happens quite fast once a woman is 35 and when the ovaries run out of eggs the period stops, this is menopause. The eggs in the ovaries make a hormone (or chemical messenger) called oestrogen, so once the eggs disappear there is no oestrogen in the woman's body. This causes changes to lots of parts of a woman's body.

How will menopause make you feel?

When you are getting close to menopause and after your period stops you might feel some of these things: (pictures of a woman sweating, hot itchy, tired, grumpy)

- hot flushes and sweating a lot at night
- aches and pains
- itching under the skin
- headaches
- a dry vagina (can make sex uncomfortable)
- no interest in sex
- needing to wee more often
- feeling tired and grumpy
- depressed
- trouble sleeping
- not feeling good
- forgetting things

Does everybody have trouble with menopause?

Not all women have problems with menopause symptoms:

- some women will have no menopause symptoms
- most women will have some menopause symptoms
- some women will have bad menopause symptoms.

How long do the symptoms of menopause last?

Menopause symptoms can last for a long time (more than 5 years) but every woman is different and you can't tell how long symptoms will last.

What can I do?

Most women won't need medicine for their menopause symptoms. You might even feel better by changing the way you eat and moving more.

Some of these things might help the menopause symptoms and others will just be good for your health.

Eat well

- being a healthy weight can help reduce hot flushes
- a good diet with vegetables, fruits, cereals and dairy foods can be good for your weight, your heart and your bones
- try not to have too much caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate) - it can cause hot flushes
- alcohol can cause hot flushes, so try not to have more than 2 drinks a day

Be active

- being active is good for your health; it's good for your weight and your bones
- try to do 30 minutes of activity on most days of the week

Keep cool

- Use fans, water spray and cool drinks when you have hot flushes
- Wear layers of clothing, so you can take them off when you feel hot

No smoking

- Smoking is bad for health and can cause hot flushes
- After menopause, women can have osteoporosis (thinning bones), heart disease and lung cancer so smoking is bad for all of these things

Look after your emotional health

- menopause can cause changes to how you feel and sometimes you might feel a bit depressed, or more sad, angry or grumpy
- Hormone changes can cause mood changes or it might be because of hot flushes and sweats causing bad sleep
- medicine for hot flushes, night sweats etc. might help emotional health and wellbeing too
- see a doctor or the clinic if you are having these problems.

Medicine for menopause symptoms

If you are having a lot of trouble with menopause you might need to talk about this with a doctor or nurse to see if medication might help.

These are some of the medicines used around the time of menopause.

The Pill or an IUD

If you still have periods these might help with periods and some menopause symptoms.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

- once periods have stopped.
- HRT can help with hot flushes, night sweats, poor sleep
- HRT is not suitable for all women
- women who take HRT need to see the doctor for a check one a year

Non-hormonal medication

- Some women can't have HRT (e.g. if you've had breast cancer or you have heart disease) so another medicine used for depression can help with anxiety and hot flushes

Natural therapies

Some women don't want to use medicines and prefer to use natural treatments. There are lots of things sold but not all of them will help hot flushes.

'Natural' herb and plant medications can have side effects too so if you are using these tell the doctor; because some can affect the way other medicines work in the body.

After menopause

Hormone changes at menopause can affect your health in different ways:

Vaginal dryness

After menopause the vagina can be very dry and uncomfortable and you might not feel like having sex. There are creams and treatment that will help this problem but it is important to talk about it with a doctor or nurse.

Sexual desire

After menopause some women don't feel like having sex any more. If your level of desire is a problem for you, it's affecting your life and relationship with your partner, talk to a doctor.

Heart disease

- The risk of heart disease for women goes up after menopause
- Menopause can also cause increased blood pressure, cholesterol and other lipids
- Healthy eating, regular physical activity, a healthy weight and not smoking will all help to reduce your risk of heart disease
- Some women will need to take medication for high blood pressure and/or cholesterol

Bone health and osteoporosis

- Osteoporosis is more common after menopause. It causes bones to lose strength, become weaker and be more likely to break
- Smoking, lack of exercise, alcohol and high caffeine intake (5-6 cups per day) can increase the chance of developing osteoporosis
- Foods with calcium are good for bones, women should eat plenty of:
 - milk, cheese and yoghurt
 - canned fish with bones (e.g. sardines)
 - almonds
 - tofu
 - leafy green vegetables, legumes like chick peas and kidney beans

- Women also need to have bone health checks as part of their women's health checks.

Weight gain or redistribution

- Menopause doesn't cause women to gain weight but it can cause body fat to shift from the hips to the tummy
- Weight gain around the stomach is not healthy and can increase blood pressure and increase blood fat and increased the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dementia and some cancers.
- Maintaining a healthy weight at this time of life is very important to help reduce the risk of chronic disease.

Don't forget about...

Contraception

If you do not want to become pregnant, you should continue using contraception until

- one year without a period if you are over the age of 50
- two years without a period if you are under 50 years.

Bleeding

It is important that if you have any bleeding after menopause, see your doctor to find out what is causing it.

Pap smears

Once you have reached menopause you should continue to have a Pap test every two years until the age of 70. Visit their local health centre for information.

Breast health

- Get to know the normal look and feel of your breasts, this will help you notice if any changes happen.
- Check breasts while showering, dressing or looking in the mirror.
- Look for changes in the breast or nipple, a lump, changes to the skin, discharge or pain.
- If you find any of these changes see the doctor or women's health nurse

Breast Screen – If you are over 50 you can have a free breast screen every two years. A breast screen or mammogram is a special X-ray of the breast and is the best way to find breast cancer early. Visit your local health centre for information.

What to do if your partner is going through menopause

The symptoms of menopause can cause problems in relationships because your partner might feel sad, grumpy, and irritable, have mood swings or she might not feel like having sex or sleeping in the same bed as you. Some support and understanding from you might help her cope better

Some tips:

1. Don't try to fix things just listen
2. Find out a bit about menopause so you know what is going on
3. Ask about her symptoms so you can understand what she's going through
4. Be understanding if she asks you to do something to help her cope better
5. Just because she doesn't want to have sex, it doesn't mean she's not interested in you. Think of other ways to be close to her.
6. If menopause symptoms are affecting your partner's life, you might need to encourage her to see a doctor.
7. Menopause can affect a woman's mood. Try and be patient and if she seems depressed encourage her to get help.

FEATURED ARTWORK

"Gestation I"

by Kate Russell

