

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Menopause: what is it?

The menopause is when your periods stop for good. It isn't an illness. It's a normal part of every woman's life. But sometimes it causes symptoms that can be distressing. You can get symptoms of the menopause for several years. There are some treatments that may help.

What happens in the menopause?

Your doctor will say you have gone through the menopause when you haven't had a period for a year. You can get symptoms of the menopause long before your periods stop for good. This is because the changes in your body which lead to the menopause start much earlier, even as early as 10 years before your last period.

As you approach the menopause, your ovaries make less of two important hormones: oestrogen and progesterone. In the years before you reach the menopause, you may notice that your periods aren't so regular. This is often one of the first signs that your hormone levels are changing. It usually begins in your 40s and it can last for several years.

Eventually your ovaries make so little oestrogen and progesterone that your menstrual cycle and your periods stop. This is when you have reached the menopause. You can't get pregnant once your periods have stopped for good. But you should still use contraception leading up to the menopause. You won't know for a while that your periods have stopped completely.

Most women will go through their menopause between the ages of 45 and 55, but some have an early menopause. Doctors say a woman has an early menopause when it happens before she is 40. Some women still have periods even when they're over 55. These women are said to have a late menopause. Having a late menopause usually runs in families, but it can also happen if you are overweight.

What are the symptoms?

Some women don't have any problems when they go through the menopause. But most get one or more symptoms, which can be mild or more distressing.

Some symptoms, like hot flushes, are caused directly by changes in your hormones. But other changes might be caused by ageing or emotional changes in your life. You may find it hard when your children leave home, or you may have to look after elderly parents. Things like this can make the changes that the menopause brings harder to deal with.

Irregular periods can be an early sign of the menopause. You may find your periods are lighter than before, or heavier. They might last longer, or just a few days, and they might be more or less frequent. All of these things are normal. But if you have very heavy periods (needing to change pads or tampons every hour) or if you get bleeding after sex or 'spotting' mid-cycle, see your doctor.

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These are common symptoms of the menopause:

- Hot flushes, where you suddenly feel hot and may go red in the face. They may be mild, or bad enough to wake you at night. Some people find hot flushes are triggered by caffeine, spicy foods, hot drinks or alcohol.
- Night sweats, usually caused by hot flushes at night. But night sweats can be caused by other things, like an infection, so see your doctor if you get them.
- The lining of your vagina becomes drier and thinner during the menopause. This can cause itching and make sex painful.
- Losing interest in sex.
- Problems sleeping. You might find it hard to get to sleep, wake up because of hot flushes, or wake up very early and be unable to get back to sleep.
- Putting on weight and other changes such as a loss of muscle tone and increased fat around your middle. Doctors don't know if this is because of hormone changes, or just part of getting older.
- Feeling low or depressed, or having mood swings. These negative feelings can include being irritable, anxious, panicky and forgetful.

Usually, your doctor can tell from your symptoms and your age whether you are going through the menopause. But if you are younger than 40, you may need a blood test (called the FSH test) to find out for sure.

What will happen to me?

Women experience the menopause in different ways. You may sail through the menopause with few problems. Or you may have severe symptoms that affect the quality of your life.

One large survey of women aged between 45 and 54 found that, although most of them had had at least one symptom of the menopause, less than half said that their symptoms were a problem.

Your experience of the menopause may depend on what else is going on in your life. You may find it more difficult to cope with if you're under stress for other reasons.

Your feelings about this time in your life will affect how you experience the menopause. Some women see the menopause as a positive step in moving on to the next stage of life. Other women feel anxious or depressed about the physical changes.

Once you have been through the menopause, it's important to look after your health, especially to keep your bones strong and look after your heart. You can do this by:

- Eating a balanced, healthy diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and low amounts of fat, including plenty of calcium (found in low-fat dairy products)
- Drinking alcohol in moderation
- Maintaining a healthy weight

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- Not smoking
- Doing regular exercise, including weight-bearing exercise like walking or jogging.

What treatments work?

There are a number of treatments that can help with menopausal symptoms. These include hormone treatments (HRT) as well as other medicines and herbal treatments. For more details, see our information on taking HRT.

Things you can do for yourself

Here are some things that you can try to help yourself feel better. But bear in mind that there isn't any scientific evidence to show for sure that these things will help.

Hot flushes: breathe deeply and relax when you have a hot flush. Avoid things that trigger your hot flushes, such as spicy food. Dress in layers that you can remove easily. Run your wrists under cold water. When you feel very hot, take a cool shower. Sleep in a cool room. Have a fan and a cold drink by your bed. Use cotton sheets.

Dry or itchy vagina and pain having sex: check with your doctor to make sure that you don't have an infection. Try an over-the-counter lubricant or moisturiser for use in the vagina. Some experts say that having sex regularly can help keep your vagina healthy.

Little interest in sex: if you have lost interest in sex and it bothers you, try talking to your sexual partner about this. Sometimes going to a counsellor can help.

Urinary problems such as incontinence: try pelvic floor muscle exercises. These involve repeatedly tightening and relaxing the muscles that control the flow of urine. Your doctor or practice nurse should have information on how to do these. Make sure you drink plenty of water. This helps to keep your urinary system healthy and can help keep infections away.

Feeling down or lacking in energy: do things that you enjoy. Make sure you see your friends. Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. Learn some stress-reduction techniques like yoga or relaxation exercises. Try to get plenty of sleep. Relaxation techniques and exercise may both help if you have problems sleeping.

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