

# Menopause

## What is menopause?

Menopause is the time when you stop having menstrual periods. It is a natural part of a woman's life. It is not a disease and does not have to be treated. However, some women have bothersome symptoms and seek treatment for them. Also, some health problems, such as osteoporosis (thinning and weakening of the bones), are linked to the hormone changes that happen with menopause.

## What is the cause?

As you get older, your ovaries slowly start making less of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone. Menstrual periods get irregular. After a time, your periods stop completely. Menopause happens suddenly if your ovaries are removed.

Most women go through menopause between ages 45 and 55. Symptoms of menopause may last just a few weeks or months, but some women have symptoms for several years.

## What are the symptoms?

Hormone changes can cause physical, mental, and emotional symptoms before and during menopause. The symptoms may come and go. Some women don't have any symptoms.

Physical symptoms may include:

- Irregular menstrual periods and then no periods
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Feeling very tired
- Changes in your sleep patterns
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Muscle and joint pain
- Dry skin
- Vaginal dryness, sometimes causing discomfort or pain during sex
- More frequent need to urinate, or leakage of urine
- More frequent vaginal and urinary infections

Menopause can also cause mental and emotional symptoms, such as:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Mood swings, tearfulness, and irritability
- Less interest in sex

- Trouble concentrating and remembering things

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. You may have tests to check for other possible causes of your symptoms, such as:

- Blood tests
- Pelvic exam
- Pap test, which is a test done during a pelvic exam to check for abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix or vagina

If you over age 45 and have not had a menstrual period for 12 months, you are probably in menopause.

## **How is it treated?**

To treat menopause symptoms and help prevent osteoporosis, your healthcare provider may recommend lifestyle changes, such as a healthy diet and exercise program. Your provider may prescribe medicine to:

- Treat anxiety, depression, and mood swings
- Treat hot flashes and other symptoms
- Get regular, weight-bearing exercise, such as walking.
- Make sure that you have enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet. Your healthcare provider may recommend calcium supplements with vitamin D.
- Take medicine prescribed by your healthcare provider for osteoporosis.

Treatment with estrogen and progesterone may be prescribed to treat symptoms of menopause if other treatments are not helping. This treatment is called estrogen therapy, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), or menopausal hormone therapy (MHT). In addition to treating menopausal symptoms, MHT can help prevent bone loss (osteoporosis).

Discuss the risks and benefits of hormone therapy with your healthcare provider. Hormone therapy may increase your risk for heart disease. It may also increase your risk for stroke, breast cancer, blood clots, gallbladder problems, and possibly dementia. If you still have your uterus and choose to take hormones, you will need to take progesterone with the estrogen. Taking estrogen alone may increase your risk of cancer of the uterus.

Estrogen may be taken in many different forms, such as:

- Tablets to be swallowed
- Patches or lotion to be put on the skin
- A cream, ring, or tablet put into the vagina
- Pellets placed under the skin
- Shots

If you are going to take hormone therapy, ask your healthcare provider about:

- The different types and dosages of hormone therapy
- Any side effects or special precautions you should know about
- When you should start and stop taking the hormones

## **How can I take care of myself?**

Follow the treatment plan your healthcare provider recommends. Take all medicines as directed by your provider.

To help your general mental and physical well-being, you should:

- Have a physical exam and recommended tests as often as your provider recommends.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Keep your bones healthy.
  - Get regular, weight-bearing exercise, such as walking. Regular physical exercise will also help you feel better and keep a healthy weight.
  - Be sure to include foods that are high in calcium in your diet, such as dark green vegetables and nonfat or low-fat dairy products.
  - Take a calcium or vitamin D supplement if recommended by your healthcare provider.
  - Take medicine for osteoporosis if it has been prescribed for you by your healthcare provider.
- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- If you want to drink alcohol, ask your healthcare provider how much is safe for you to drink.
- Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.
- Learn ways to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax. For example, take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- If you have had no menstrual periods for several months or years and then have bleeding from the vagina, check with your healthcare provider right away. Unusual vaginal bleeding can be a sign of a precancerous problem or cancer of the uterus.

You may find it helps to:

- Wear cotton sleepwear to reduce discomfort from night sweats.
- Use a vaginal lubricating cream or jelly if sex is painful.
- Talk and share feelings with a friend or family member.
- Join a support group for women who have been or are going through menopause.

You can get more information from:

- North American Menopause Society  
800-774-5342  
<http://www.menopause.org>

Developed by RelayHealth.

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