

Understanding Menopause and Its Challenges



Menopause

Menopause is a normal change in your life that usually happens when you are in your late 40s to mid-50s and your period stops. That's why some people call menopause "the change of life." During perimenopause, your body begins making less of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. (Perimenopause is the years leading up to menopause and one year after your final menstrual period.) You have reached menopause when you have not had a period for 12 months in a row (and you are not pregnant or breastfeeding

and you have no other disease-related causes for this change). As you near menopause, you may have symptoms from the hormone changes in your body. Many women wonder if these changes are normal. Many women are confused about how to treat their symptoms. It may help you feel better to learn all you can about menopause and to talk with your doctor about your health and your symptoms. If you want to treat your symptoms, your doctor or nurse can teach you more about your options and help you make the best treatment choices.

Symptoms of Perimenopause

Some women may not have any symptoms around the time of menopause. Other women may have these symptoms:

- ◆ Changes in your period: The time between periods and the flow from month to month may be different.
- ◆ Abnormal bleeding or "spotting": Common as you near menopause. But if your periods have stopped for 12 months in a row and you still have "spotting," you should report this symptom to your doctor to rule out serious causes, such as cancer.
- ◆ Hot flashes ("hot flushes"): Getting warm and possibly sweaty in the face, neck, and chest.
- ◆ Night sweats and sleeping problems: These symptoms may lead to feeling tired, stressed, or tense.

- ◆ Vaginal changes: The vagina may become dry and thin, and sex and vaginal exams may be painful. You also might get more vaginal infections.
- ◆ Weakening of your bones: This may increase your chances of bone breaks (osteoporosis) and loss of height. *See the Getting Strong Bones chapter, starting on page 42, for information on osteoporosis.*

These changes may also happen around the time of menopause, but are not necessarily caused by hormone changes:

- ◆ mood changes, such as mood swings, depression, and irritability
- ◆ urinary problems, such as leaking urine when sneezing, coughing, or laughing; or burning or pain when urinating
- ◆ problems with concentration or memory
- ◆ less interest in sex and changes in sexual response



Who Should NOT Take Hormone Therapy for Menopause?

Women who

- think they are pregnant
- have had certain kinds of cancers (such as breast cancer and uterine cancer)
- have had a stroke or heart attack
- have had blood clots
- have liver disease

- ◆ weight gain or increase in body fat around your waist
- ◆ hair thinning or loss

Treatment for Menopause

Should you seek treatment for the symptoms of menopause? Many of your menopause symptoms will go away over time without treatment. Some women will choose treatment for their symptoms or to prevent bone loss that can happen around the time of menopause. Treatments may include prescription drugs that contain types of hormones that your ovaries stop making around the time of menopause. Menopausal hormone therapy can contain the hormone estrogen alone, for a woman who does not have a uterus or womb, as a result of a hysterectomy or surgical removal. Menopausal hormone therapy can also contain estrogen with the hormone progesterone, for a woman who still has her uterus. Estrogen therapy usually is taken by pill or skin patch,



as a cream or gel, or using a vaginal ring or tablet. How estrogen is taken can depend on its purpose. For instance, a vaginal ring or cream can ease vaginal dryness, but it may not relieve hot flashes. If you only want to prevent bone loss, you also should talk with your doctor about medicines other than menopausal hormone therapy that can help your bones.

Risks and Benefits of Menopausal Hormone Therapy

Benefits. Menopausal hormone therapy can help with menopause by

- ◆ reducing hot flashes
- ◆ treating vaginal dryness
- ◆ slowing bone loss

What Have We Learned About Taking Menopausal Hormone Therapy?

We know that menopausal hormone therapy may be an effective way to help with symptoms of menopause. Hormones do NOT help prevent heart disease, stroke, memory loss, or Alzheimer's disease. **If you decide to use hormones, use them at the lowest dose that helps and for the shortest time needed. Check with your doctor regularly to see if you still need them.** Because both benefits and risks are linked to taking them, every woman should think about these in regard to her own health. She should also discuss these issues with her doctor. We are still trying to learn more about the long- and short-term effects of hormone therapies on women's health.

DO NOT use hormone therapy to prevent heart attacks, strokes, memory loss, or Alzheimer's disease. And remember, there are other medicines that can help your bones. Talk with your doctor to identify what will work best for you.

Risks. For some women, menopausal hormone therapy may increase their chance of getting

- ◆ blood clots
- ◆ heart attacks
- ◆ strokes
- ◆ breast cancer
- ◆ gallbladder disease



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For a woman with a uterus, taking estrogen alone, without progesterone, increases her chance of getting endometrial cancer (cancer of the lining of the uterus). Adding progesterone to the estrogen therapy lowers this risk.

Menopausal hormone therapy also may cause these side effects:

- ◆ vaginal bleeding (like having a period)
- ◆ bloating
- ◆ breast enlargement or tenderness
- ◆ headaches
- ◆ mood changes
- ◆ nausea

Natural Treatments

Some women decide to take herbal, natural, or plant-based products to help their symptoms. Some of the most common products include the following.

- ◆ **Soy.** Soy contains *phytoestrogens* (estrogen-like substances from a plant). But there is no proof that soy—or other sources of phytoestrogens—really do relieve hot flashes. Any risks of taking soy,



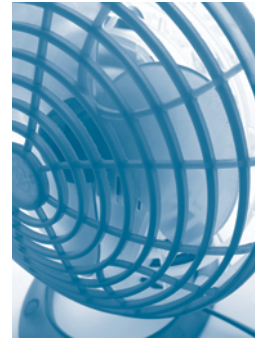
especially the pills and powders, are not known. You can get soy from foods, too. Soy food products include tofu, tempeh, soy milk, and soy nuts.

- ◆ **Bioidentical hormone therapy.** Some women are interested in menopausal symptom therapies marketed as “bioidentical hormone therapy.” Every product is custom compounded, so the mixture of hormones and other substances can vary from patient to patient, from bottle to bottle. Although some products are labeled as “natural” and containing plant products, they are not necessarily safer or more effective than prescription hormone products. Before using these therapies, you should discuss them with your doctor. You should also tell your doctor about all the medications you are taking, both prescription drugs and the over-the-counter products, including herbal products. Some herbal products can interact with drugs.



Other Ways to Help Your Symptoms

- ◆ **Hot flashes.** A hot environment; eating or drinking hot or spicy foods, alcohol, or caffeine; and stress can bring on hot flashes. Try to avoid these triggers. Dress in layers and keep a fan in your home or workplace. Regular exercise might also bring relief from hot flashes and other symptoms. Ask your doctor about taking an antidepressant medicine. There is proof that these medicines can be helpful for some women.



- ◆ **Vaginal dryness.** Use an over-the-counter, water-based vaginal lubricant. Your doctor might also give you prescription estrogen creams or tablets. If you have spotting or bleeding while using estrogen creams, tell your doctor.
- ◆ **Problems sleeping.** One of the best ways to get a good night’s sleep is to get at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. But avoid a lot of exercise close to bedtime. Also avoid alcohol, caffeine, large meals, and napping near bedtime. You might want to drink something warm, such as herb tea



or warm milk, before you go to bed. Try to keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature. Try to go to bed and get up at the same times every day.

- ◆ **Memory problems.** Keep an active mind. Read, work crossword or other puzzles, or learn something new. Try to get enough sleep and be physically active.
- ◆ **Mood swings.** Try to get enough sleep and be physically active. Think about going to a support group for women who are going through the same thing as you are. Or think about getting counseling to talk through your problems and fears. Antidepressant medicines may also help in some cases. Ask your doctor whether these medicines are right for you.

Improve Your Health Whether You Use Hormones or Not

You have many ways to stay healthy during this time in your life.

- ◆ Be active and get plenty of exercise. Try to get at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. Try weight-bearing exercises, like walking, running, or dancing.
- ◆ If you smoke, quit. Ask your doctor for help.
- ◆ Eat healthy.
 - Eat lots of whole-grain products, vegetables, and fruit.
 - Choose foods low in fat and cholesterol.



- Get enough calcium and vitamin D to keep your bones strong. Women older than 50 need 1200 mg of calcium per day. You also need 400 IU of vitamin D from ages 51 to 70. You need 600 IU of vitamin D after age 70.
- ◆ If you drink alcohol, limit it to no more than one drink per day. “One drink” is defined as one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.
- ◆ Control your weight. Ask your doctor what a healthy weight is for you.
- ◆ Talk with your doctor and get regular checkups.
- ◆ Discuss bone health. Ask if you’re getting enough calcium and vitamin D. Get a bone density test if you’re older than 65, or if your doctor says you have a high chance of getting osteoporosis. Ask about taking medicine to help preserve bone and slow down bone loss.
- ◆ Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose checked regularly.
- ◆ Have regular breast exams, breast x-rays (a mammogram), and Pap tests.



Then and Now

Researchers used to think that thin women have worse menopausal symptoms. But researchers are now finding that the opposite is true. The heavier the woman, the worse some menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes or night sweats, actually are. Our knowledge about the symptoms of menopause is growing. New information continues to emerge.

Use this chart to keep track of menopausal symptoms that bother you. Take it with you when you visit your doctor, so you both can figure out the best way to handle them.

Date	Symptoms	Things I've tried to help them	Questions to ask my doctor	New things to try