



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

# Perimenopause

**Q: What is perimenopause?**

**A:** Perimenopause is the time leading up to menopause when you start to notice menopause-related changes—plus the year after menopause. Perimenopause is what some people call “being in menopause” or “going through menopause.” But menopause itself is only one day—the day you haven’t had a period for 12 months in a row. During perimenopause, your ovaries start to shut down, making less of certain hormones (estrogen and progesterone), and you begin to lose the ability to become pregnant. This change is a natural part of aging that signals the ending of your reproductive years.

**Q: When does perimenopause start?**

**A:** Women normally go through perimenopause between ages 45 and 55, but some women start perimenopause earlier, even in their 30s. When perimenopause starts, and how long it lasts varies from woman to woman. You will likely notice menopause-related symptoms, such as changes in periods.

**Q: What are some of the signs and symptoms?**

**A:** Menopause affects every woman differently. Your only symptom may be your period stopping. You may have other symptoms, too. Many symptoms at this time of life are because of just getting older. But some are due to approaching menopause. Menopause-related symptoms

you might have during perimenopause include:

- Changes in pattern of periods (can be shorter or longer, lighter or heavier, more or less time between periods)
- Hot flashes (sudden rush of heat in upper body)
- Night sweats (hot flashes that happen while you sleep), often followed by a chill
- Trouble sleeping through the night (with or without night sweats)
- Vaginal dryness
- Mood changes, feeling crabby (probably because of lack of sleep)
- Trouble focusing, feeling mixed-up or confused
- Hair loss or thinning on your head, more hair growth on your face

When you visit your doctor, take along a diary about what’s happening with your period. For a few months before your visit, record when your period starts and stops each day, and indicate whether it is light or heavy. Also note any other symptoms you have.

**Q: Is there any treatment for perimenopause? What can I do?**

**A:** Some women take oral contraceptives (birth control pills, or “the pill”) to ease perimenopausal symptoms—even if they don’t need them for birth control. These hormone treatments of combined estrogen and progestin can help keep your periods regular plus ease all the symptoms listed above. Talk with your doctor to see if this option is for you. If you are over 35, you should not



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take birth control pills if you smoke or have a history of blood clots. You need a prescription to get oral contraceptives.

After a woman reaches menopause, if she still needs treatment for menopause symptoms, she should switch from birth control pills to menopause hormone therapy (HT). HT contains much lower doses of hormones, and thus has less risk for bad side effects.

Making some changes in your life can also help ease your symptoms and keep you healthy.

- **Eat Healthy.** A healthy diet is more important now than before because your risks of osteoporosis (extreme bone loss) and heart disease go up at this stage of life. Eat lots of whole-grain foods, vegetables, and fruits. Add calcium-rich foods (milk, cheese, yogurt) or take a calcium supplement to obtain your recommended daily intake. Get adequate vitamin D from sunshine or a supplement. Avoid alcohol or caffeine, which also can trigger hot flashes in some women.
- **Get Moving.** Regular exercise helps keep your weight down, helps you sleep better, makes your bones stronger, and boosts your mood. Try to get at least 30 minutes of exercise

most days of the week, but let your doctor recommend what's best for you.

- Find healthy ways to cope with stress. Try meditation or yoga—both can help you relax, as well as handle your symptoms more easily. Our “Stress and Your Health” FAQ can be a good resource as well.

**Q: Can I get pregnant while in perimenopause?**

**A:** Yes, you can get pregnant until you've gone 12 months in a row without a period. Talk to your doctor about your birth control options. Keep in mind that birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms will not protect you from STDs or HIV. If you use one of these methods, be sure also to use a latex condom or dental dam (used for oral sex) correctly every time you have sexual contact. Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs and HIV—the only sure protection is abstinence (not having sex of any kind). But making sure to always use—and correctly use—latex condoms and other barrier methods can help protect you from STDs. ■



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*For more information . . .*

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**National Institute on Aging**

Phone: (800) 222-2225, (800) 222-4225  
(TTY)

Internet Address: <http://www.nih.gov/nia>

**The North American Menopause Society**

Phone: (800) 774-5342

Internet Address:  
<http://www.menopause.org>

**Food and Drug Administration (FDA)**

Office on Women's Health

Internet Address: [www.fda.gov/womens/menopause](http://www.fda.gov/womens/menopause)

This FAQ was reviewed by The North American Menopause Society (NAMS).

April 2006