

Menopause Awareness

The menopause is a completely normal process in which a woman stops having periods and is unable to get pregnant naturally. Periods start to become fewer and the time between each period increases, their frequency decreases over a few months or years before they completely stop.

Symptoms – Short term:

- Hot flushes occur in about $\frac{3}{4}$ women. They last a few minutes causing flushing of your face, neck and chest, you may also sweat slightly. Some women become giddy and weak and even develop heart palpitations. They can start just before the menopause and can last for several years.
- Sweats commonly occur at night, can sometimes be so severe they can disrupt sleep and you need to change your bedding.
- Changes in period can be the time between become shorter or longer as well as becoming heavier around the time of the menopause.
- Headaches
- Anxiety
- Tiredness
- Loss of libido

Symptoms – Long term:

- **Skin and hair** – you tend to lose some collagen post menopause, this can cause your skin to become drier, thinner and more likely to itch.

- **Genital area** – lack of oestrogen causes the tissue in and around the vagina to become thinner and drier, they may take months or years to develop. It may mean you experience some pain during sex, your vulva may become thin, dry and itchy. You may also have to pass urine more frequently and some women develop problems with urine infections.
- **Osteoporosis** – bone mass decrease faster in women than in men, especially after the menopause, leaving them more susceptible to osteoporosis as oestrogen helps prevent bone loss.
- **Cardiovascular disease** – increased likelihood again due to decreased oestrogen levels

What causes the menopause?

The menopause is a natural part of ageing, it will usually begin to occur during the ages of 45–55 years old. It occurs as woman's ovaries stop producing the hormone oestrogen and they no longer release an egg each month.

The average age that women experiences the menopause is 51 years old, however 1 out of every 100 women will experience the menopause before the reach 41 years old, this is known as premature menopause.

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In many cases of premature menopause no clear cause is identified, there are factors that may increase an individual's risk of premature menopause. These might include:

- Hysterectomy
- Autoimmune disorders
- Chemotherapy or radiotherapy
- If the individual has a family history of premature menopause

Treatments

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) –

this is used to help relieve the symptoms of the menopause. It replaces the oestrogen that your ovaries no longer make after the menopause, and is combined with progestogen to form HRT products.

By taking just oestrogen alone the lining of your uterus builds up and this can lead to an increased risk of uterus cancer. If you have had a hysterectomy then you will be prescribed oestrogen only HRT.

Although the symptoms of the menopause will usually pass after a couple of years, HRT offers relief from these as they can be very unpleasant. HRT is available as tablets, skin patches, nasal spray, gels or a vaginal ring. It can also help prevent the onset of osteoporosis which is more common post-menopause.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) –

this is a brief, non-medical approach that can be helpful for a range of health problems. It is a tool that is used to develop practical ways of managing problems by providing new coping skills and useful strategies. It can be used as an alternative treatment for those who experience mood swings, low mood and anxiety around the time of the menopause.

By speaking to your GP they will be able to advise you on the best way to treat certain symptoms. They will also be able to provide you with more specific information regarding the treatments and refer you for specific treatments and guide you through your entire course until your menopausal symptoms have passed.

Exercise throughout the menopause

Regular exercise and increased activity levels have been associated with a greater ability to cope with the symptoms of menopause. It is able to provide relief for both short and long term symptoms. Regular exercise:

- Maintains your muscle strength
- Improves your mobility and flexibility
- Prevent the onset of osteoporosis
- Reduces the risk of heart disease
- Releases endorphins to help improve your mood and reduce stress levels

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Nutrition throughout the menopause

It's important to maintain good nutrition all the time, but especially whilst going through the menopause. Each meal should contain the following:

- **Wholegrain, low GI carbohydrates** – these take longer to break down so will give you a sustained energy source and prevent you from snacking as well as providing you with a good source of fibre
- **Protein** – used for muscle and cell repair and growth. Meat sources provide a good amount of iron, zinc and b vitamins
- **Unsaturated fat source** – Omega 3 unsaturated fats are good for brain health and can bring into balance the omega 3: omega 6 ratio that can also improve skin, hair and nail health

It is also important to consider that you should have a high Calcium and Vitamin D intake. Calcium is important as when absorbed it helps strengthen bones, it is important to get enough Vitamin D as well as this helps the absorption of calcium into the bones.

Aim to consume at least five fruit and vegetable portions a day. A rainbow of fruit and vegetables will provide you with a variety of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Cut down on trans fats and you excess sugar intake as these can become addictive, high volumes consumed will increase your risk of obesity, diabetes and the other health risks that come with it.

When should you see your GP?

It's worth talking to your GP if you have menopausal symptoms that are troubling you or if you're experiencing symptoms of the menopause before 45 years of age.

Your GP can usually confirm whether you are menopausal based on your symptoms, but a blood test to measure your hormone levels may be carried out if you're aged 40 to 45. Blood tests may also be carried out to help diagnose suspected premature menopause if you're under 40 and have menopausal symptoms.

It is important for you to realise that you can get help, your GP will give you guidance on how best to manage your menopause. Using the treatment plan set out by your GP, combined with a well balanced approach to your exercise and nutrition can help you to manage the menopause more effectively.

Resources:

- www.menopausematters.co.uk/
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/
- www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/hormone-replacement-therapy-hrt/