

Menopause

Menopause, also known as 'the change of life', is the final menstrual (monthly) period in a woman's life. It is a natural occurrence and marks the end of the reproductive years, just as the first menstrual period during puberty marked the start. You will know that the menopause has taken place if you have not had any bleeding for 12 months.

Most women reach menopause between the ages of 45 and 55, the average being around 50. Menopause before the age of 40 is called 'premature menopause' and 'early menopause' before 45.

Hormone levels fluctuate as menopause approaches

As you approach menopause, the production of hormones (such as oestrogen) by the ovaries starts to slow down. Hormone levels tend to fluctuate and you may notice changes in your menstrual cycle. For example:

- Cycles may become longer, shorter or totally irregular
- Bleeding may become lighter
- Bleeding may become unpredictable and heavy (seek advice from your doctor).

Eventually your hormone levels will fall to a point where menstruation (periods) will cease altogether and the menopause is reached.

Although fertility after the age of 45 is low, you still need to use contraception to prevent pregnancy (even if only barrier contraception such as male or female condoms) until you have had one year without a natural period.

Other signs and symptoms

Some of the symptoms that women may experience include:

- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Aches and pains
- Crawling or itching sensations under the skin
- Forgetfulness
- Headaches
- Irritability
- Lack of self-esteem
- Reduced sex drive (libido)
- Sleeping difficulty – wakefulness or waking hot and sweaty
- Tiredness
- Urinary frequency
- Vaginal dryness.

Long-term health risks

A decrease in female hormones after menopause may lead to:

- Thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) and an increased risk of fractures
- An increase in the risk of heart attack and heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke.

Managing the menopause

Unpleasant symptoms of the menopause can often be greatly reduced by improving your lifestyle with a healthy diet and regular exercise.

Healthy diet

Suggestions for managing menopause symptoms through diet include:

- Choose a wide variety of foods, including plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits, cereals, whole grains and small portions of lean meat, fish or chicken.
- Increase fluids and eat low-fat dairy foods with high calcium content.
- Decrease caffeine and limit alcohol (aim for 1–2 standard glasses or less per day).

Exercise

Regular exercise is important. At least 30–45 minutes on most days of the week will:

- Maintain your heart health and improve your general health
- Keep your bones healthy and prevent bone loss through osteoporosis
- Help maintain good balance and reduce the risk of injury from falls
- Provide a feeling of relaxation and wellbeing
- Possibly help improve hot flushes.

Understand your body's changes

It is important to understand the changes your body is going through during menopause. There are many different sources of information available. Make sure you seek out credible websites and brochures that provide up-to-date, non-biased information from organisations that specialise in women's health.

Avoid smoking

It's important to avoid smoking because of the associated risk of osteoporosis, coronary heart disease and lung cancer (which may soon exceed breast cancer as the leading cause of death in women). For help to quit smoking, call the Quitline on 131 848.

Think positive

Some women experience mood changes such as mild depression and irritability. These symptoms are often related to physical changes such as hot flushes, night sweats and poor sleeping. It's important to keep a positive outlook. Consult with your health practitioner or a psychologist if you are experiencing any significant or persistent changes in mood.

Regular Pap tests and breast checks

You should have:

- Two-yearly Pap tests – see your doctor.
- A two-yearly mammogram – this is a **free**, Australia-wide service for women over 40. Contact BreastScreen Australia on 132 050 for more information.

Hormone replacement therapy (also known as hormone therapy)

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) effectively reduces many of the unpleasant effects of symptoms of the menopause and may be appropriate for short-term use in women with moderate to severe menopausal symptoms. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of hormone therapy with your doctor.

If you are one of the 10 per cent of women who have severe symptoms lasting 10 years or more, you may continue longer term use of HRT. It is important to have a check-up once a year to assess the specific risks and benefits you may experience as a result of the therapy.

Natural therapies

These can be of benefit to some women. It is important to remember that 'natural' herb and plant medications can have unpleasant side effects in some women, just like prescribed medications. A registered naturopath may provide long-term guidance and balance through the menopausal years.

Natural therapies can often be taken in conjunction with hormone therapy. It is important to let both your doctor and naturopath know exactly what each has prescribed and to consult your doctor before taking any herbal treatments or dietary supplements. Some natural therapies can affect or interact with other medications you may be taking.

Where to get help

- Jean Hailes for Women's Health Tel. 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)
- Your doctor
- Your local community health service
- Specialised women's health clinic
- BreastScreen Australia Tel. 132 050
- Quitline Tel. 131 848

Things to remember

- Menopause means the end of monthly periods.
- You may experience a range of symptoms.
- A healthy lifestyle will help to manage symptoms.
- You should have regular breast checks and Pap tests.
- Mammogram screening is free if you are over 40.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Jean Hailes for Women's Health

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