

## Menopause and sexual issues

Menopause, the final menstrual period, occurs when a woman stops ovulating and her monthly period (menstruation) ceases, marking the end of her reproductive years. A woman's sex drive or libido can be affected by menopause. Contraception, physical changes such as a dry, painful vagina, body image, hormone changes, relationships and social issues may also affect sexuality and libido.

The production of sex hormones, in particular oestrogen, falls significantly around menopause. Testosterone levels in women slowly decline from about 20 years of age. A woman in her forties has, on average, half the testosterone circulating in her bloodstream as a woman in her twenties. The reduction of these hormones may directly affect libido or sex drive and sexual function in some women. Menopause may also cause physical and psychological changes that will affect sexual function.

Other important issues that may influence the menopausal woman's sexual desire and activity include contraception, physical changes (such as a dry, painful vagina), body image, relationship issues, medications, illness and life stresses.

### Contraception and menopause

Pregnancy is possible, though rare, before and even after your last period. It is generally advised that menopausal women should use contraception until at least one year after their natural periods have ceased. This is because a pregnancy late in a woman's reproductive life increases the risk of birth defects for the child and health problems for the mother. If a woman is under 50 at time of final period, it is recommended she uses contraception for two years.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is **not** a form of contraception. HRT is prescribed by a doctor to help manage symptoms of menopause. However, HRT does not contain sufficient hormones to suppress ovulation, so pregnancy can still occur.

There are many different options for contraception, which need to be discussed with your doctor.

Women who are sexually active, particularly if starting a new relationship, should also continue to use condoms to protect against sexually transmissible infections (STIs). When using a condom, if a lubricant is necessary, it should be water-based to avoid condom breakage.

### Physical changes with menopause

Both during and after menopause, a woman may notice certain physical changes that affect her sexuality in positive and negative ways. These changes may include:

- **Vaginal changes** – as oestrogen levels fall, the walls of the vagina become thinner and drier. This loss of lubrication can make having sex uncomfortable.
- **Slowed sexual response** – getting aroused and reaching orgasm may take longer and be less intense.
- **Infections** – the post-menopausal vagina and bladder are more susceptible to bacterial infections.
- **Menopause symptoms** – can include hot flushes, night sweats, insomnia and unusual skin sensations like prickling or itching.
- **Touch avoidance** – some women can't bear to be touched. Their skin feels more sensitive and they may recoil from closeness, particularly sexual intimacy. The physical discomfort of menopause symptoms may reduce a woman's interest in sex or make her tired. Even the close proximity of her partner may be distressing because of the combined body heat.
- **Absent periods** – a woman who was troubled by heavy or painful periods may feel relieved and positive about her change of life. This can lead to a renewed interest in sex.

- **No fear of pregnancy** – many women who were trying to avoid pregnancy during their reproductive years may find menopause begins a time of renewed sexual interest. Without fear of possible pregnancy, sex becomes relaxed, fun and more frequent.

## Body image and menopause

Some of the issues that may contribute to a menopausal woman's body image include:

- **Social attitudes** – Western culture tends to value youth and thinness as beauty, while older women are rarely portrayed as sexual or desirable. These ingrained social attitudes may prompt some women who are approaching menopause to feel less attractive. Other women may erroneously believe that sex is only for the young, and this attitude can cause sexual interest and activity to wane.
- **Weight gain** – an increase in body fat, especially around the abdomen, can occur during menopause because of hormonal changes. The age-related decrease in muscle tissue and the associated slowing of the metabolism also contribute.
- **Changes to body hair** – some women experience abnormal hair growth after menopause, particularly on the face. Others may experience thinning of scalp and pubic hair.

## Other issues

Other issues that may impact on a woman's sexuality during and after menopause include:

- Ill-health – since disorders such as cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis are more prevalent in older women
- Some medications – such as some antidepressants or antihypertensives (for high blood pressure), which may affect sexual function and libido
- Ill-health or sexual difficulties of a partner – such as erectile problems
- Loss of a partner – through death, divorce or separation
- Depression
- Children leaving or staying at home – children leaving home allows more sexual freedom for the older couple, while children staying at home may restrict independence and the 'revolving door', with children coming and going, can also have an impact.

## Enhance your sex life

Suggestions to maintain or improve your sex life after menopause include:

- Talk openly with your partner about sex and the impacts – both positive and negative – of menopause.
- Physical changes may slow your reaction times. Plan for slow, lingering sessions of lovemaking.
- Try widening your sexual horizons and include sexual activities that don't involve vaginal penetration such as oral sex, sexual aids and mutual masturbation.
- Regular masturbation helps to improve blood flow and muscle tone.
- Wash your vulva with warm water rather than soap, which can further dry and irritate the tissues. Sorbolene or Vaseline may provide some moisture if your vulva is dry.
- If vaginal dryness persists, consider using water-based vaginal lubricants, available from pharmacists and supermarkets.
- Vaginal preparations of oestrogen creams, tablets and pessaries or hormone replacement therapy can help manage vaginal dryness. Consult with your doctor.
- Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet to maintain an appropriate weight for your height.
- Oestrogen plus testosterone therapy may affect sexuality positively.
- Seek advice from a professional if you need help with any sexual issues.
- Relationship or sexual counselling may help resolve issues with partners.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Jean Hailes for Women's Health Tel. 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)

## Things to remember

- Important issues influence a woman's sexual desire at menopause including contraception, body image, hormone changes and relationships.
- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is not a form of contraception.
- Seek advice from a professional if you need help with any sexual problem.

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

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