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Menopause

Overview

Menopause is defined literally as the final menstrual period, but the term is commonly used to describe a time at the end of reproductive life, also known as 'the change' or 'the change of life'.

It is an unavoidable fact of life for all women and happens when the ovaries stop producing eggs. It is coincides with decreases in the production of oestrogen and progesterone, which can cause some less-than-comfortable symptoms like hot flushes and night sweats.

Menopause generally occurs sometime between the ages of 45 and 55, with the average age around 52. It can also occur earlier than these ages. If it happens before the age of 40 it is known as 'premature menopause'. Between the ages of 40 and 45 it is known as 'early menopause'. Premature menopause can occur naturally, or may be caused by cancer treatment or surgery to remove the ovaries.

Sometimes menopause symptoms can start years before the process is complete, and this is often described as the perimenopause period, or transition period.

Menopause is regarded as complete when a woman has had no menstrual periods for 12 consecutive months.

Symptoms

Any woman who has experienced the symptoms of menopause will have a story to tell, but the fact is that it will affect each woman differently.

Some women will suffer greatly from their symptoms, while an estimated 20% will experience no symptoms at all. It is generally accepted that about 60% of women will have mild symptoms and the remaining 20% will experience severe symptoms.

Symptoms of menopause include:

- Changes to menstrual periods. Periods may become lighter, shorter, longer, irregular, and in rare cases, extremely unpredictable and heavy.
- Hot flushes.
- Night sweats.
- Aches and pains, in particular, sore joints.
- Headaches. These can be persistent mild headaches or severe migraines.
- Dry and sore eyes.
- A crawling or itching sensation on and under the skin.
- Vaginal dryness, irritation and itching, which may lead to painful intercourse.
- Decrease in sex drive or libido.
- Changes to urinary regularity, most commonly increases in frequency.
- Fatigue.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Irritability.
- Mood swings.
- Sleeping problems, especially insomnia.
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering things.
- Heart palpitations.

This is by no means a complete list, but a

collection of common symptoms. You should always consult your doctor if you are concerned about any health problems, as these may or may not be linked to menopause.

Menopause and its symptoms can combine to have a major impact on a woman's confidence and self-esteem, so it is very important to have a strong support network that includes family and friends, as well as your doctor and allied health professionals. There is research to suggest that menopause can increase a woman's risk of heart disease and osteoporosis, highlighting the importance of ongoing professional treatment.

Diagnosis

To diagnose menopause, your doctor will usually use a combination of history, and ask about physical and emotional symptoms. Age is a major consideration.

Although there are some diagnostic tests that can confirm if a woman is in the process of menopause, including blood tests to measure hormone levels, they are unreliable and are generally not done.

A vaginal examination may be undertaken, including a pap smear if necessary.

It is likely that your doctor will ask you at what age your mother went through menopause, as this can play a major part in the age that you go through the process.

Once menopause has been completed, most doctors would recommend a woman undergo a full medical health check-up, including blood tests, to provide an assessment of their health. It also offers valuable information that can act as a benchmark for tests that might be needed in the future.

Treatment

There is no cure for menopause as it is a natural stage of the female life-cycle that must proceed at its own pace until the transition is complete.

With this in mind, the focus for treatment is on managing symptoms, particularly those that can make life very uncomfortable, such as the hot flushes, incontinence and vaginal dryness and irritation.

Which treatment to use can be confusing because there are so many different options out there, so your doctor is a good place to start to see what might assist your individual needs.

It is important to remember that until 12 months have passed with no menstruation, a woman should continue with a form of contraception if she does not want to become pregnant.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

One of the common treatments for menopausal symptoms is hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which can include oestrogen, combined oestrogen/progesterone, and combined oestrogen/ testosterone.

HRT has had its share of controversy in recent years, brought on by the release of a study in 2002 that indicated it could cause significant adverse heart problems and breast cancer,

though the absolute risks for both were small, and the heart disease risks in particular did not apply to women under 60 years of age.

The absolute breast cancer risk for combined oestrogen/progesterone was less than one extra case per 1000 treated women, per year. When oestrogen alone was given to women without a uterus, there were actually fewer breast cancers in the actively treated women.

It is generally accepted that HRT has a role to play in treating symptoms of menopause. HRT should be used with close guidance from your doctor, and should take your individual needs and medical history into account, as well as considering the benefits, risks and potential side effects.

In most cases, HRT should be prescribed for women with early or premature menopause, at least until the age of 50.

Natural therapies

Natural therapies are popular for many women, especially those who don't want to use or who are unable to use HRT. But in most cases, the evidence is that natural therapies are no more effective than a placebo and some may even have adverse effects.

Natural therapies include:

- Phyto-oestrogens.
- Botanical and herbal products such as black cohosh, ginseng, St John's wort, valerian, passion flower and ginkgo.
- Acupuncture may assist with some symptoms, and is used in Chinese medicine as a focal part of menopause treatment.
- Yoga, relaxation therapies, homeopathy, reflexology, and counselling may be helpful.
- Vitamin supplements, especially vitamin D and calcium to maintain bone density.
- XR.
- Throughout the menopause transition and beyond, it is important to continue to maintain regular health checks such as pap smears and breast checks (including mammograms).

Lifestyle and diet

Lifestyle plays a big part in staying healthy before, during, and after menopause.

Some things that can help are:

- A diet rich in fresh vegetables, fruits, cereals and whole grains will help manage weight.
- High-calcium, low-fat dairy products are very important to keep your bones healthy, and lean meats and proteins will help reduce the risk of heart disease.
- If you are overweight, it will help to take steps to address this, along with quitting smoking if you are a smoker.
- Minimising caffeine intake may help reduce hot flushes, because it is a known trigger, as is alcohol.
- You should aim for regular exercise of around 30 minutes a day.
- Stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of water — between 6-8 glasses each day.

Support and resources online

Some online resources for menopause include:

The Australasian Menopause Society

www.menopause.org.au

The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health

www.jeanhailes.org.au

The International Menopause Society

www.imsociety.org

ItsMyHealth.com.au