

Managing Menopause



As women, we all know hormones play a critical role in our bodies from a young age all the way through adulthood and into our senior years. After the childbearing years, though, many women begin to wonder about menopause – when it will begin, what it will feel like, and what it means for our health and well-being as we age. Understanding what menopause is and how it progresses, and knowing how to manage the transition in a healthy manner, can help ease the anxiety many feel about this inevitable change.

The Stages of Menopause

When it comes to menopause, we've all heard the horror stories – from hot flashes to night sweats, mood swings, and everything in between. The truth about menopause is that it isn't quite as dramatic as it seems on TV, and it actually occurs gradually over time in three distinct stages. The average length of time, from start to finish, is seven years. Historically, menopause was regarded as mostly negative, but there is a changing school of thought that many women are embracing with a belief that menopause just may be the start

to best years of their lives. While the symptoms and process can feel long and overwhelming at times, there are new natural strategies designed to help make this transition more manageable.

Stage 1 – Perimenopause

The transitional period leading into menopause is called perimenopause, and it typically occurs for several years before true menopause. While the average length of perimenopause is four years, it ranges widely from woman to woman. Some women may be in perimenopause for several months while others have reported symptoms for up to ten years.

Most women begin perimenopause in their late 40s, but others may occur in their 30s. During this time, your ovaries gradually reduce their production of estrogen and progesterone, the hormones responsible for menstruation and fertility. You can still get pregnant during this time, but fluctuations in your cycle may make it a bit more difficult. While perimenopause typically occurs naturally, other factors such as chemotherapy and radiation, a hysterectomy, or conditions such as ovarian insufficiency can cause the onset of perimenopause, too.

What to Expect During Perimenopause

The telltale signs that most people think of during menopause actually occur during perimenopause. During this time of transition, women may experience fluctuations in their menstrual cycles and periods. They may become shorter, longer, heavier, lighter, or less frequent – until they stop altogether. The later symptoms of perimenopause, which usually occur in the last year or two of perimenopause often include hot flashes, breast tenderness, urinary incontinence, lower sex drive, fatigue, vaginal dryness, weight gain and slowed metabolism, hair thinning, trouble sleeping, or mood swings. This barrage of symptoms will vary from one woman to the next, but most will experience at least a few of these most common indicators.

Stage 2 – Menopause

The good news is that by the time you've officially entered menopause, you've probably experienced most of the symptoms that come with it. Menopause is defined as the permanent end of menstruation, and most doctors say you haven't truly hit menopause until you've gone twelve months without a period. Some of the symptoms of menopause will last for several years after you've hit menopause, but they usually taper off over time.

Stage 3 – Postmenopause

The time after menopause is called postmenopause. After menopause, women have different health risks and conditions to look out for, so it's important to be informed (but not alarmed). Here are some of the most common things postmenopausal women need to be aware of.

Risk of Cardiovascular Disease

Declining estrogen levels increase your risk of heart disease. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle to reduce your risk is more important than ever during this time, which means exercising, eating healthy foods, and maintaining a normal weight. Postmenopausal women should work with their physicians to address any potential cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, or being overweight.

Deteriorating Bone Health

Postmenopausal women are at risk for osteoporosis, which is when your bones become brittle and weak. The first few years after menopause are a critical time of bone loss for many women, so you may want to talk with your physician about getting screened for osteoporosis, and for strategies to prevent it. Women with osteoporosis are at risk for fractures, particularly in areas such as the spine, hips, and wrists.

Weight Gain

Menopause causes your metabolism to slow, which can lead to weight gain. Many women are surprised that they gain weight during menopause when their eating or lifestyle habits haven't changed at all. While this is normal, it can be frustrating. You may need to pay closer attention to what you eat and how often you exercise to maintain a healthy weight than you have in previous years.

Sexual Changes

Many women experience a decrease in sex drive as well as vaginal dryness during or after menopause. Some women even report decreased sensation and vaginal atrophy (thinning of the vaginal walls), which can make intercourse uncomfortable for some.

Urinary Incontinence

Coughing, sneezing, laughing and lifting are no joke after



Evening Primrose Oil

menopause. That's because menopause can lead to a loss of elasticity in the tissues located throughout your lady parts, which can cause frequent and sudden urges to go, followed by a loss of urine that can take you by surprise.

Managing Menopause Gracefully (and Naturally!)

Treatment for menopause symptoms has changed significantly over the years. While women historically took hormone replacement therapy without question, we now know that there are risks that come with these treatments. For those not interested in medical therapy, here are some alternative options that have helped millions of women get through this time of transition.

Hot flashes and night sweats

– Some natural remedies that could offer relief include flaxseed (ground or oil), evening primrose oil, Vitamin E, and black cohosh. To beat the heat, sip a cold drink or suck on ice chips. Invest in an electric fan and wear/use wicking clothes and/or bedding.

Mood changes – Exercise and deep-breathing techniques have helped many women manage their fluctuating moods during menopause. Others use St. John's wort or Vitamin B6.

Sleep troubles – Proven strategies include keeping a consistent schedule and avoiding caffeine and alcohol late in the day. Other options to try just before bed include listening to music, reading,

taking a bath, or drinking chamomile tea.

Sexual discomfort – There are numerous options to help you manage dryness, discomfort, or lack of libido, including moisturizers, lubricants, and estrogen treatments. Some women say regular practice helps, too.

Urinary incontinence – Natural treatment options such as Kegel exercises, topical estrogen treatments, hormone therapy and even physical therapy are all good to consider if your symptoms start to impact your quality of life.

Menopause is a natural part of a woman's lifecycle, and it doesn't have to be all bad. Becoming familiar with the process and managing your symptoms can help make it a little easier to manage. Finally, communicate with your loved ones about what you're going through – a little support and understanding can go a long way in helping you work through this time of transition.

Sources

[Duration of Menopausal Vasomotor Symptoms Over the Menopause Transition](#) (JAMA Internal Medicine)

[Menopause.org](#)

[Menopause](#) (Mayo Clinic)

[Menopause Health Center](#) (WebMD)