

# Menopause and Hormone Therapy

Menopause is a normal part of aging and affects everyone differently. Some women notice little change in their bodies or moods, while others find menopause very uncomfortable. Learn more about effective options for relieving menopause symptoms, including the use of hormone therapy.

## What is menopause?

Menopause occurs when your ovaries stop producing eggs. You reach menopause when you have a final period and 12 months pass after that final period.

The average age for reaching menopause in the United States is around 51, but menopause usually occurs anytime between late-40s to mid-50s.

It's common to start noticing menopause symptoms while still having your period. This can happen for months and often years before reaching menopause. This time period is called *perimenopause*. The time that follows your final period is called *postmenopause*.

Menopause does not mean the end of your femininity or sexuality. For many, it's a relief to not worry about becoming pregnant or having periods anymore.

## The role of estrogen

Estrogen is the hormone necessary for menstruation and pregnancy. It also affects other parts of the body, including the heart, bones, urinary tract, skin and hair.

In your mid-30s, your ovaries start to decrease estrogen production. Over time, hormone levels continue to change and ovulation becomes more irregular. You eventually reach a point where you will no longer ovulate or menstruate.

## What are symptoms of menopause?

The hormonal changes that occur before and during menopause can cause various symptoms including:

### Irregular and missed periods

During perimenopause, irregular and missed periods are common. The time between periods may be shorter or longer. Flow can become lighter or heavier. You may also noticed spotting or bleeding between periods.

### Hot flashes

Hot flashes are described as a feeling of intense warmth or flushing that begins around the chest and spreads to your neck and face. They often last a few minutes and can happen at any time of day or night. Hot flashes that occur at night are called *night sweats*. Sweating and chills may follow a hot flash.

Some women have several hot flashes a day while others may have just a few a week, or none at all. They might occur for a few months, but it's also normal to experience hot flashes for several years. Generally, these become less severe over time.

### Vaginal dryness

Reduced estrogen levels in your body contribute to vaginal dryness, which may continue postmenopause.

With less estrogen in your body, the vaginal walls lose elasticity, become thin and drier. This can cause discomfort or pain during intercourse.

A safe, water-soluble lubricant can be used to relieve dryness. Do not use lubricants with fragrance or heating ingredients. They can irritate tissue and skin.

Vaginal estrogen supplementation is often beneficial, but your clinician needs to prescribe it.

### Mood changes and sleep problems

Studies suggest a relationship between lower hormone levels and depression, moodiness, irritability, fatigue, sleep problems and other psychological symptoms common during menopause. Lack of sleep (hot flashes may play a role) can contribute to mood and other psychological symptoms.

### Urinary problems

Reduced estrogen levels can decrease muscle tone in your urinary tract. Sometimes this leads to loss of bladder control, called *incontinence*.

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The bladder has many estrogen receptors, so estrogen supplementation may be one way to help prevent incontinence. Talk to your clinician about other treatments and what might be best for you.

## Can symptoms be prevented?

While menopause cannot be prevented, sometimes symptoms can be minimized or possibly prevented.

A healthy lifestyle may help reduce symptoms and will support your overall health. In addition, various treatments are available. These include hormone therapy, estrogen or progesterone therapy (or both), antidepressants and herbal or dietary supplements.

## What lifestyle habits may help?

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Aim for foods high in fiber with plenty of whole grains, vegetables and fruits. Limit sugar, unhealthy fats, and refined, processed carbohydrates to help manage weight.
- **Be physically active.** Regular activity benefits your heart and bones. It also helps manage weight, protects against diseases and improves well-being.
  - » Aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking, biking or swimming, 5 to 6 times a week.
  - » Try to add resistance or strengthening exercises at least 2 times a week.
- **Do not smoke.**
- **Avoid becoming overheated.** Dress in layers you can remove if you have a hot flash. Avoid warm rooms if possible and exercising before bedtime.

## Hormone therapy (HT) treatment

Studies show hormone therapy (HT) is often the most effective treatment for relieving many menopause symptoms, but it is not always necessary. If the discomfort of menopause symptoms impact daily life, HT could be considered. It can help:

- Relieve hot flashes, vaginal dryness and urinary tract symptoms.
- Improve symptoms of irritability and anxiety, and may relieve mild depression.
- Improve sleep - often due to relief from hot flashes.

HT does not cause weight gain, despite widespread beliefs otherwise. Most women gain weight around menopause and have an increase in abdominal fat.

## Disease prevention and risks

Studies show HT can help prevent osteoporosis and may reduce risk of colon cancer and diabetes. But HT may increase risk for breast cancer, heart disease, blood clots or stroke. Lifestyle, environmental factors and medical history also play a role.

- The risks of HT differ from woman to woman, depending on the following:
  - » Type and dose of HT
  - » Age HT is started and length of use
  - » How HT is taken
  - » Personal and family medical history
- Many women have concerns about their risk for breast cancer. Short-term use does not appear to increase the risk for breast cancer, but long-term use (5 or more years) can increase risk.

Clinicians who are knowledgeable in HT can assess and create a treatment plan based on health history, risks and benefits, and your your specific health needs.

## Alternative or complementary medicine

Some women find relief using herbal supplements but studies are mixed. Acupuncture, massage and other therapies are reported to be helpful for some as well.

Common supplements include flax seed, chasteberry, dong quai root, turmeric, black cohosh, red clover extract, ginkgo biloba, astragalus, wild yam, soy products, St. John's wort and evening primrose oil. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate herbal or dietary supplements so their safety is unknown.

Talk to your clinician before combining supplements with HT or other medicine as they may cause side effects. Non-hormonal medications are also available. Find out what kind of treatment might be most beneficial for you.

## For more information

Visit the Menopause Society (North American Menopause Society) at [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)

