

What is menopause?

Menopause, strictly speaking, is the moment in time when a woman has had her last menstrual period and is no longer fertile, which is confirmed after she has not had a period for 12 months. More accurately, there is a time leading up to menopause, called perimenopause, during which a woman's hormone levels begin to decrease, and then there is life following menopause, or post-menopause.

Though it is a natural biological process, and certainly not an illness, menopause can cause physical and emotional symptoms of varying severity that can be disruptive to sleep, energy, and emotional health, and which can be treated.

When does menopause usually begin?

The time leading up to menopause, called perimenopause, begins on average in women aged 45 years. However, it can start at any time between the ages of 39 and 51, and may last an average of 5 years. The average age of menopause for Canadian women is 51.

Menopause isn't always caused by the natural decline of hormone production in the body, however. It can also be brought on by one of the following:

- **Hysterectomy.** When your uterus is removed during this surgical procedure, but not your ovaries, you usually won't enter menopause. However, when you undergo a total hysterectomy and bilateral oophorectomy (removing uterus and ovaries), the procedure will cause immediate menopause.
- **Chemotherapy and radiation therapy.** Undergoing these cancer therapies can induce menopause and lead to symptoms during the course of therapy or months later.
- **Primary ovarian insufficiency.** Though the cause of this condition is not fully understood, it is a result of your ovaries not producing normal levels of reproductive hormones. For the nearly 1 percent of women under 40 who reach menopause, this may be a likely cause.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The signs and symptoms of menopause begin to appear in perimenopause, which may begin many years before menopause is reached. There are a variety of common symptoms, though not everyone will experience them, and certainly not to the same degree.

For some women, perimenopause will be virtually symptom free, while others will have symptoms that significantly affect their quality of life. The following are common symptoms of the approach of menopause and beyond:

- **Hot flashes.** About 3 in 4 women will experience these perceived increases in temperature that can lead to sweating. They are due to a change in the range of temperatures in which a woman feels comfortable, called the thermo-neutral zone, which is directly affected by estrogen levels. As levels of this hormone drop, hot flashes and sweating may begin. Almost half of women will have hot flashes for 5 years or more without treatment, and some even up to the age of 70. Hot flashes at night are referred to as night sweats.
- **Changes to mood and memory.** Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, and the occasional difficulty with remembering things or concentrating can be signs of perimenopause. Some women will also suffer from lower self-esteem or even depression, especially if they view menopause negatively as a sign of aging.

- **Mild incontinence.** Bladder control can be reduced during perimenopause and beyond, leading to minor urine leakage (perhaps when laughing or sneezing). This symptom may increase susceptibility to recurrent urinary tract infections.
- **Changes to appearance.** Decreasing estrogen levels may also lead to increased wrinkling, and you may notice other physical changes such as increased abdominal fat, thinning hair, and loss of breast fullness.
- **Sexual changes.** Vaginal dryness or decreased lubrication can be caused by low levels of estrogen, and may even lead to painful intercourse. You may also have reduced sensitivity in your sexual organs because of a reduction in blood flow to these areas.
- **Sleep disturbances.** Nearly 4 in 10 women report a sleep disturbance of any kind, including difficulty falling or staying asleep, and sleep apnea.
- **Irregular periods.** Your menstrual cycles may become longer, shorter, or completely irregular, with lighter or heavier flow.
- **Fatigue or joint pain.**

Symptoms involving your bladder or genitals may progress in the years following menopause, whereas the other symptoms are usually most difficult in perimenopause, and tend to improve in most women over a period of 2 to 5 years.

What are the possible complications?

In postmenopausal women, there are several chronic medical conditions that may develop as a result of the changes in their bodies. These may include:

- **Cardiovascular disease.** Your risk for this condition increases as your estrogen levels decline. In fact, heart disease is the leading cause of death in women, as well as in men. Lifestyle changes, such as getting more exercise, eating a healthy diet, and quitting smoking can all greatly reduce your chances of developing this chronic condition.
- **Osteoporosis.** This condition causes bones to become brittle and weak, and can lead to an increased risk of fractures. Following menopause, your bones may lose their density at a rapid rate, which is why postmenopausal women are at an increased risk of hip, wrist and spinal fractures. Getting adequate calcium and vitamin D in your diet or with supplements is one way to help keep your bones strong, as are strength-training and weight-bearing exercises, such as walking and jogging.
- **Incontinence.** Changes to the tissues in your urethra and vagina may lead to sudden, strong urges to urinate along with leakage, or the loss of urine when doing something that stresses your abdomen, such as coughing, laughing or lifting.
- **Weight gain.** You may find, along with many other postmenopausal women, that you need to eat less to maintain your normal weight—sometimes up to 400 fewer calories a day.

How are the symptoms and complications treated?

Depending on your menopausal symptoms and their severity, your doctor may recommend one or more of several treatments to provide you with some relief. These include:

- **Hormone therapy**, is a treatment option for the disruptive symptoms of menopause, especially those considered moderate to severe. It can be prescribed as a pill or a patch. It is usually prescribed at the lowest effective dose, and it is recommended that you be re-evaluated periodically. Your healthcare provider will likely discuss the effects of hormone therapy on cancer risk, in particular the association of a slight increase in the risk of breast cancer with increased duration of therapy.

- **Selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs)**, which are a group of drugs that mimic the benefits of estrogen therapy on bone density.
- **Vaginal estrogen**, which comes in the form of a tablet, ring, or cream. The low doses of estrogen, which are absorbed by the vaginal tissue, can help relieve symptoms of vaginal dryness, uncomfortable intercourse, and some urinary symptoms.
- **Vaginal lubricants or moisturizers**, for the improvement of difficult or painful intercourse, as well as vaginal dryness.
- **Low-dose antidepressants**, which can help reduce hot flashes.
- **Biphosphonates**, a class of non-hormonal drugs used to prevent or treat osteoporosis by reducing both bone loss and the risk of fractures.
- **Clonidine**, a high-blood pressure drug, in pill or patch form, that has been shown to reduce the frequency of hot flashes.
- **Psychotherapy or couples counselling**, especially for women seeking treatment for sexual problems.
- **Complementary and alternative medicines**, such as black cohosh, red-clover derived isoflavone and vitamin E may be recommended for the treatment of certain mild symptoms. However, long-term efficacy and safety data are still lacking.

Living with the different stages of menopause

You should know also be aware that any medication comes with a risk of side effects. Consider speaking with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about a medication or its potential unwanted effects.

Menopause can mean many different things to you—it may be a source of worry or anxiety, it may cause you discomfort, or it may even be a relief. Today's women are living long enough that one-third of their lives or more (25 to 30 years) will be postmenopausal. Learning about what to expect for these years, and understanding your body's changes may help you manage your transition into this period of your life, and even help you better manage your health.

Here are some specific tips to help you manage some of the symptoms and changes you may experience as you head toward menopause and beyond:

1. **Eat well.** Choose a varied diet including lots of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Limit your intake of saturated fats, oils, and sugars. And be sure to get enough calcium and vitamin D, which may require you taking supplements.
2. **Get regular exercise.** 30 minutes a day of physical activity, moderately intense, can help protect you against many of the conditions associated with aging, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and others. It's a good way to reduce stress, and to help maintain a healthy weight as well.
3. **Get enough sleep.** Things like exercising and staying away from caffeine during the day can help, as well as various relaxation techniques. If hot flashes are waking you up, you may want to ask your doctor for ways to help.
4. **Don't smoke.** On top of raising your risk for different cancers, heart disease, stroke, and many other health problems, smoking can actually bring on early menopause, and increase hot flashes.
5. **Learn to manage hot flashes.** Learning what things trigger your hot flashes and avoiding them can be a real help. Common triggers can include hot drinks, spicy foods, alcohol, and warmer temperatures. Dressing in layers can be helpful, as well as getting regular exercise.

6. **Strengthen your pelvic floor.** This area of muscle is related to incontinence, so strengthening it with Kegal exercises can actually help give you more control.
7. **Manage your vaginal discomfort.** Lubricants or moisturizers can help, as can staying sexually active.
8. **Get regular check-ups,** and go for scheduled screening tests.

Learning as much as possible about menopause—and actively working with your doctor—are effective ways to regain control over your life. There is a great deal of information out there that can help. Check out some of the websites listed below to get started.

Empowering both you and your loved ones

You and your loved ones can access the following sites to find out more information about the stages of menopause, its symptoms, treatment options, and any recent related scientific discoveries.

Resources

Helpful information and support networks on the internet:

1. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. The Menopause Handbook. February 2006. Available at www.sogc.org
2. MayoClinic.com. Menopause: Definition. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119
3. MayoClinic.com. Menopause: Causes. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=causes
4. MayoClinic.com. Menopause: Complications. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=complications
5. MayoClinic.com. Menopause: Treatments and Drugs. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=treatments_and_drugs
6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health. Understanding Menopause. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.womenshealth.gov/menopause/
7. MayoClinic.com. Menopause: Lifestyle and Home Remedies. Accessed August 2, 2010. Available at www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopause/DS00119/DSECTION=lifestyle_and_home_remedies