

Tips for Managing Perimenopause

Menopause is the beginning of a new phase in life that can be rich with personal growth, self-discovery, and the freedom to focus on what's important to you. Understanding what is happening to your body and learning what your options are for handling the physical changes that happen will help you make this transition smoothly.

What changes can I expect as I approach menopause?

The period leading up to menopause is called perimenopause. This can be relatively short or last for years. During perimenopause, women continue to have menstrual periods, but some changes, described below, can begin to appear.

Each woman's experience is different. Some women sail through perimenopause and menopause while others experience uncomfortable physical and emotional side effects. This is caused by changes in the level of hormones your body produces. As women age, the amount of estrogen and progesterone the ovaries produce begins to fluctuate. This fluctuation, which can last between two to five years, can cause menstrual periods to become heavier or lighter, and more frequent or absent for months at a time.

Physical changes during this time may include hot flashes, night sweats, sleep disturbances, urinary incontinence (leakage), vaginal dryness, fatigue, hair thinning or loss, acne, weight gain around the waistline, fuzzy thinking, and changes in sexual desire. Mood swings, depression, and anxiety may occur. These menopausal changes can be very challenging and even depressing. The good news is that it is rare for a woman to suffer from *all* of these symptoms, and those that are experienced are often occasional, temporary and mild.

When does menopause start?

After menstrual periods have stopped for a full twelve months, the transition through menopause is considered complete, though some symptoms may continue for a short while. About half of American women complete the menopausal transition before age 51, the other half, after 51. Women who have surgery to remove their ovaries (such as some hysterectomies) will immediately enter menopause. Chemotherapy may also trigger the onset of menopause and its related changes.

Is treatment available for uncomfortable menopausal changes?

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be effective in treating hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness and some types of urinary incontinence for some women without risk factors. Long-term use of (HRT) can slightly increase the risk of heart disease, breast cancer, stroke and blood clots. It should be avoided by women with any personal or family history or a high risk for these conditions.

Small doses of a type of **antidepressant medication** (which are prescribed in higher doses for depression) can be helpful for relieving hot flashes and night sweats.

Meditation (deep relaxation) helps some women have fewer or less intense hot flashes.

Many different **herbal remedies** (soy, dong quai, red clover or vitamin E) have been studied for their effects on menopausal symptoms, but have not proven to be effective for decreasing hot flashes for most women. It is best to discuss the options you are considering with your doctor who can inform you of the benefits and/or risks of any treatment approaches.

Is treatment available for uncomfortable menopausal changes? *continued*

There are various causes for a **decrease in sex drive**. The decrease in hormones produced by your body can result in vaginal dryness, which may make intercourse uncomfortable. This discomfort can be alleviated by using lubricant products available without a prescription. Sometimes using small doses of testosterone (a male hormone associated with sexual arousal, also found in small amounts in women) can help you feel more interested in sex. Your doctor will be able to evaluate if this treatment would be beneficial for you.

Mental/emotional factors can also have an influence on feelings of sexuality. The emphasis in our society on youth and beauty can result in feeling less attractive, especially if you are critical of your body or uncomfortable about the normal changes associated with aging. Having a partner who cares about you, regardless of these changes will help you feel valued and attractive. If you are feeling anxious, depressed or are experiencing low self-esteem, talking with a counselor can help you develop and maintain healthy thinking and expectations about this new phase in your life.

Can menopause affect other medical conditions?

Studies have shown that in pre-menopausal women, estrogen has a protective effect against heart disease, osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) and colorectal cancer. Consequently, when hormones decrease during and after menopause, women become more likely to develop these conditions. To decrease the risk for these conditions, women can consider taking a medication, or make lifestyle changes (healthy eating, increased physical activity, stress reduction). Your doctor can help you to assess your risks and advise you of the options that are best for your needs.

How can I maintain good health during perimenopause and menopause?

- **Quit smoking.** If you smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting. Smokers experience menopause at an earlier age than non-smokers, in addition to other health risks.
- **Keep your heart healthy.** Choose low-fat, high-fiber foods to help lower or maintain healthy cholesterol levels. If you are overweight, talk to your doctor about developing a plan for losing weight.
- **Keep moving.** Practice weight-bearing exercise like aerobics, walking and weight lifting for 20 to 30 minutes a day three to five times a week. Weight-bearing exercise can slow bone loss and any type of regular exercise can help relieve stress and improve mild depression.
- **Watch what you drink.** Drink alcohol, caffeine and carbonated beverages in moderation.
- **Promote breast health.** See your doctor annually for a clinical breast exam and, if you are over age 50, get a mammogram every 1-2 years.
- **Keep your bones strong.** In addition to exercising regularly, take 1000-1500 mg. of calcium and 400-800 I.U. of Vitamin D every day. Check out our tips on preventing osteoporosis at www.HillPhysicians.com for more tips on stopping bone loss.
- **Prevent skin cancer.** Excessive sun exposure causes unwanted wrinkles and can lead to skin cancer. Avoid the sun's most harmful rays by limiting outdoor activities to take place before 10:00 a.m. and after 4:00 p.m. If you must be in the sun, plan ahead and wear protective clothing and apply a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF 30 or greater. Remember that sunscreen prevents a sunburn; it does not prevent skin cancer.

How can I maintain good health during perimenopause and menopause? *continued*

- **Stay in touch with your doctor or health care provider.** Continue or start to see your doctor regularly. As you age, important screening tests are recommended that can identify diseases and conditions early, in their most curable stages.
- **Share support.** Every woman who lives long enough will go through menopause! Other women can give you helpful coping suggestions and make you feel more optimistic (even proud!) about the wisdom and experience that accompany aging. Men can help too!
- **Keep your sense of humor.** Laugh with others about the challenges of this time of life.

Resources

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