



## Women's Health Connection

# What You Should Know About ... **MENOPAUSE**

First and foremost, it is important to realize that menopause is not a disease but **a natural life transition**, similar to the transition into and out of puberty. While any change can be difficult at times, menopause is nothing to dread or fear.

The second-most important aspect of menopause to understand is that no two women experience it in exactly the same way. Whatever horror story or amusing anecdotes you've heard, your experience will be unique to you, and partially defined by how you approach it.

Lastly, if you are troubled by symptoms as you approach menopause, take comfort in knowing that there are things you can do to improve your situation. The more proactive you are in managing your menopause symptoms, the better you will feel during the transition.

### **Definition**

Menopause is defined as the last menstrual period and is typically diagnosed after 12 consecutive months without menstrual bleeding. The total menopausal transition is called perimenopause ("peri" meaning around). This overlaps with premenopause, which can begin as early as age 35 for some women. Those women who have completed the transition are called post-menopausal.

Menopause is the natural tapering off of the reproductive cycle, similar to the way that puberty was the beginning of that cycle. Another similarity these transitions share is that menstruation is just one aspect of the life change that occurs. Many women experience other physical, and emotional, and psychological changes during this time as well.

### **Commonly Reported Symptoms**

Most women go through menopause without any major trouble, but a few find they are miserable with debilitating symptoms. About 20% of menopausal women experience no other symptoms than menstrual irregularities. Those who do have symptoms most commonly report hot flashes and vaginal dryness, both of which usually respond to treatment.

Many women experience very positive changes during menopause. As women enter this stage of their lives, they often reflect on where they've been, what they've accomplished, and what they may still want to do. It is not unusual for menopausal women to make career changes, pursue additional education, take on new hobbies, or look for ways to serve their community.

A variety of other non-specific symptoms are also often associated with menopause. However, it is difficult to accurately attribute some of these symptoms to menopause because they are also associated with other health conditions, such as PMS or other hormonal imbalances.

These symptoms include:

- night sweats
- insomnia
- irritability
- anxiety
- mood swings
- depression
- headaches
- heart palpitations
- vaginal itching
- painful intercourse
- minor incontinence
- hair loss
- thinning skin
- changes in sex drive (increase or decrease)
- changes in energy levels (increase or decrease)

(over)

Women subjected to surgical or artificial menopause through removal of (or damage to) the ovaries are likely to have more dramatic symptoms than those who have a natural, gradual transition through their menopause. Fortunately, many of the symptoms associated with menopause can be alleviated with proper treatment.

## ***Treatment Options***

Determining the most appropriate treatment option begins with careful tracking of your symptoms. Use a **Symptom Chart** similar to the one provided with this information to identify the occurrence, duration and severity of symptoms. Focus on the symptoms that are most troubling for you. For a symptom that occurs infrequently or does not seem to bother you much, consider whether you really need treatment or if you can live with it, or if perhaps there is another way of dealing with it. For example, eliminating the stress in your life, eating a healthy diet, and getting regular exercise may help alleviate some of your symptoms.

When you have an idea as to which symptoms you want to address, how often they occur, and how they affect your daily life, meet with your healthcare practitioner to discuss the treatment alternatives. The decision to use—or not use—any treatment should be an informed decision, based on fact, not emotions or media hype. Today's treatment options include a wide range of choices, including:

- over-the-counter remedies, such as creams for vaginal irritation or dryness
- alternative approaches, such as acupuncture and meditation
- herbal remedies and food supplements
- hormone therapies, including oral and topical forms.

As part of this decision process, you should also discuss the need for hormone tests with your healthcare practitioner, both pre- and post-treatment. Multiple tests over a period of time usually provide a more reliable measure than a single test.

Another aspect of the decision process is the known risk factors. Your healthcare practitioner will likely want to know about your family medical history and any prior health conditions. A history of cardiovascular disease or osteoporosis may influence your treatment decision.

If you decide that hormone therapy is the best treatment option for you, be aware of the differences between conventional hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and natural hormone supplements. Natural hormones are those that are biochemically identical to the hormones found in your body. As such, their effects in the body are the same as the hormones they are supplementing.

The hormones in most conventional HRT are not biochemically identical. They work by replacing or substituting one hormone for another in the body, such as substituting progesterin for the body's natural progesterone. Because these substances are not biochemically identical to the ones they are replacing, unintended side-effects are more likely to occur.

In addition, most conventional HRT comes in just a few standardized doses, which may or may not include the optimum dose for your needs. Natural hormone supplements are often custom compounded, which allows for precise dosing and potency, tailoring each prescription for each individual's needs.

If you start hormone therapy and the treatment does not seem to be working for you, consult your healthcare practitioner because your prescription may require some fine tuning. Custom compounding allows for making finer adjustments, as needed, to treat symptoms and minimize side effects. Ongoing hormone testing will also help maintain the optimum hormone balance for your needs.

For more information about hormone therapy, please see:

<http://www.womensinternational.com>

For more information about menopause and women's health, please see our web site:

<http://www.womenshealthconnection.com>