

Menopause

Menopause, or 'change of life', is the last menstrual period in a women's life and marks the end of her fertility. The hormone changes leading to natural menopause develop gradually over several years and can cause physical, emotional and psychological symptoms and changes.

When a woman has not had a period for 12 months in a row, and there is no other cause, menopause is confirmed. Most women reach natural menopause somewhere between the ages of 45 and 55 years.

The changes leading to natural menopause begin as a woman's ovaries start to produce less of the female hormones called oestrogen and progesterone. This may cause changes in the menstrual cycle and symptoms of menopause. Over time hormone levels continue to decrease until eventually menstruation stops. The time of change between regular periods and menopause is called perimenopause.



Oestrogen and progesterone influence mood, weight, body shape, appetite, skin, sex drive, bladder and sex functions, blood vessels and bone health, so menopause symptoms involve these areas.

Signs and symptoms

Signs and symptoms of menopause can start several years before a woman's last period. They include:

- Irregular and unusual periods
- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Vaginal dryness (which may make sex uncomfortable)
- Crawling or itching feelings under the skin
- Headaches
- Aches and pains
- Reduced sex drive
- Emotional changes (e.g. mood swings, anxiety, irritability, crying)
- Depression
- Tiredness
- Sleeping problems
- Memory problems
- Poor concentration
- Urinary problems (e.g., frequency, leakage)
- Changes in skin, appearance and body shape.

Risks

After menopause, permanently lower amounts of female hormones in the body may lead to:

- Thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) and bone fractures
- Sagging of the uterus and/or vagina (prolapse)
- Urine leaks when sneezing, coughing or on sudden exertion

- Increased risk of heart disease
- Increased risk of stroke.

Self care

- Dress in layers and wear cotton clothes to help deal with hot flushes.
- Continue to use contraception until you have had one year without a natural period.
- Try a vaginal lubricant to increase comfort during intercourse. Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- Don't smoke. Smoking is linked with early menopause.
- Examine your breasts regularly. Have a mammogram every 2 years from the age of 50 or, if your mother or sister had/has breast cancer, every year from the age of 40. BreastScreen Australia provides free screening to all women over 40 years.
- Have regular pap tests. All women aged 18-70 who have ever been sexually active should have a pap test every two years. Ask a doctor.
- Ask a doctor about unusual symptoms (e.g. breast lumps, heavy bleeding, painful intercourse).
- Have blood pressure and cholesterol level checked regularly.
- Ask a doctor about checks for osteoporosis.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Ask friends and family for support.

Healthy eating

- After menopause women need at least 1300mg of calcium per day for bone health. To increase your calcium

intake eat high calcium, low fat dairy foods every day. Calcium supplements are also available. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Try foods containing phytoestrogens/isoflavones (weak plant oestrogens) that may reduce menopause symptoms (e.g. soy, linseeds and legumes).
- Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).

- Limit alcohol.
- Limit caffeine (tea, coffee, cola, chocolate, energy drinks).

Exercise

- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week for heart health, weight control, relaxation and general wellbeing (e.g. walking, swimming, cycling).
- Do weight bearing and resistance exercises (e.g. walking, dancing, weights) to strengthen bones and muscles.
- Do pelvic floor exercises every day to strengthen bladder muscles.

Medicines

Hormone replacement therapy

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) replaces female hormones and can relieve unpleasant symptoms of menopause. HRT must be prescribed by a doctor.

HRT is available in several different forms including tablets, skin patches, skin gels and vaginal creams and pessaries. HRT is also available in different hormone and dose combinations and a woman may need to try several different products to find the HRT that suits her best.

Evidence suggests that for some women the side effects of some types of long term HRT may outweigh the benefits. As most women only need HRT help for a short time, it is important to discuss the advantages

and disadvantages of using HRT with a doctor.

There is no conclusive evidence that 'bioidentical hormone' products that have been compounded for a particular woman are better or safer than commercial hormone products that have been tested and approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

Other medicines

Some complementary ('natural' or herbal) medicines claim to relieve symptoms of menopause, but the effectiveness of many of these products has not been scientifically proven. Some of these products have side effects, interact with other medicines and are not suitable for all women. Ask a doctor, pharmacist or naturopath for advice when choosing a complementary medicine.

For more information

Sexual Health and Family Planning

Website: www.shfpa.org.au

The Australasian Menopause Society

Website: www.menopause.org.au

The Jean Hailes Foundation

Phone: 1800 Jean Hailes (532 642)

Website: www.jeanhailes.org.au

BreastScreen Australia – National breast screening program

Phone: 13 20 50 for information and appointments.

Website: www.cancerscreening.gov.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

NPS: Better choices, Better health

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: