

Menopause

While menopause is a natural process that all women experience, sudden menopause brings some unique challenges. Instead of your body having years to get used to a gradual decline in the hormone estrogen, menopause caused by cancer treatment happens more quickly. If you were having periods before treatment and then you had your ovaries surgically removed or chemically shut down, you immediately become postmenopausal. This means your body is no longer making estrogen, and estrogen affects many tissues in your body.

Because of the abrupt change, you may feel the symptoms of menopause with greater intensity. There is no way to know which women will get symptoms or how severe the symptoms may be in a particular woman. There are a range of things you can do. Start with the basics:

- ✓ Eat a well-balanced diet, including lots of vegetables and fruits.
- ✓ Exercise regularly.
- ✓ If you smoke, stop: Smoking can make menopausal symptoms worse.
- ✓ Try relaxation techniques to reduce stress.

What about Hormone Replacement Therapy?

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was the standard treatment for hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms and thought to prevent heart disease. In 2002, a large clinical trial questioned the safety of HRT. Hormone therapy is no longer recommended for disease prevention but evidence since 2002 shows it may be a good choice for certain women, depending on their risk factors. Please discuss your options with your doctor.

Managing Specific Symptoms

Hot Flashes, also called hot flushes, are feelings of great heat that suddenly rush through your upper body and face. Your skin may redden like a blush, and you may sweat. You may be anxious or feel your heart racing. Hot flashes can happen at any time and last for a few seconds to a few minutes.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Try to identify what triggers your hot flashes and avoid them. Hot beverages, spicy food, alcohol, caffeine, cigarette or cigar smoke, tight clothing, warm temperatures, and certain medications are common triggers.
- ✓ Dress in layers during the day so you can remove a layer or two when a hot flash occurs. Wear clothes made of natural fibers that “breathe,” such as cotton. Use an electric fan to relieve the heat, or modify the temperature in the room.

- ✓ Exercise daily. Swim, walk, ride a bike, or go dancing.
- ✓ Practice deep breathing exercises. Take slow, deep, full breaths at about 6-8 breaths per minute, expanding and contracting your abdomen as you breathe and release. Practice for 15 minutes, twice a day, or when you feel a hot flash coming on. Better yet, take a yoga or meditation class to learn classic breathing techniques.
- ✓ Naturally occurring substances called bioflavonoids may help with hot flashes. Bioflavonoids are plant pigments that give many fruits and flowers their color. Good sources of bioflavonoids include all citrus fruits, berries, red onions, parsley, white and green tea, and dark chocolate containing 70% or more of cocoa.

Ask your doctor

Speak to your doctor before you take any “natural” or herbal remedies, or vitamins. Herbal remedies can cause side effects and drug interactions, just like prescription drugs. Soy products, black cohosh (sold under the name Remifin®) and red clover may reduce hot flashes, but they are natural estrogens and should not be taken by women who have certain kinds of cancer. Other herbals, such as kava, may affect the liver. Even Vitamin E has been shown in some studies to be unsafe for women with breast cancer. Always consult your doctor about any medications you want to take.

Night Sweats and Trouble Sleeping are also common problems. Intense hot flashes, called “night sweats,” can disrupt sleep. Some women sweat so much they soak through their pajamas and sheets. Other women don’t have night sweats but find they are restless, able to sleep for only a few hours, or awaken too early and can’t get back to sleep. Lack of sleep can make you tense, irritable, and moody.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Follow the recommendations discussed in the section, Hot Flashes.
- ✓ Don’t drink alcohol before you go to bed. Alcohol is known to disturb sleep.
- ✓ Place a chilled towel over your pillow, or slip an ice pack underneath.
- ✓ Have a cup of chamomile tea before you go to bed. It may relax you.
- ✓ If you can’t sleep, get up and do something rather than lying in bed getting frustrated. Don’t go to bed until you are tired, no matter how late it gets. In this situation, becoming truly exhausted may be the best way to finally get to sleep.

Ask your doctor

If your insomnia is severe, speak with your doctor. Extreme lack of sleep not only can make you miserable, it may cause serious health problems. There are many prescription medications and over-the-counter drugs that can help you sleep. All such drugs, however, are for short-term use only, unless your doctor prescribes otherwise. They all have side effects.

Vaginal Changes: Reduced estrogen causes the vaginal lining to thin, and makes the vagina shorter and narrower. These changes may result in vaginal dryness, irritation and, ultimately, inflammation. The dryness may make sexual intercourse uncomfortable or even painful. Continued vaginal inflammation can lead to further thinning or vaginal ulceration.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Use vaginal lubricants or moisturizers—for example, K-Y® Jelly, Replens® or Astroglide®—as needed to treat vaginal dryness.
- ✓ Regular sexual stimulation, with the help of a vaginal lubricant, can help maintain vaginal health. Be sure the lubricant is compatible with latex condoms, if your partner uses them.
- ✓ Bioflavonoids may also help with vaginal dryness. See the section Hot Flashes for more information.

Mood Swings: Many postmenopausal women feel sudden changes in mood in a matter of a few minutes. Depression or anxiety also may result. These symptoms may be caused by the decrease in estrogen, or they can be the result of stress and disrupted sleep.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Follow the recommendations discussed in the section, Night Sweats and Trouble Sleeping.
- ✓ Exercise regularly. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These chemicals have been shown to reduce stress, balance moods and improve sleep.
- ✓ Meditation, yoga, tai chi, or other relaxation techniques can help with this symptom, too.

Ask your doctor

If the symptoms aren't relieved by these self-help measures, ask your doctor if you may be a candidate for prescription antidepressants or other mood-stabilizing medications.

Problems with Memory and Concentration: Postmenopausal women often complain of “brain freezes,” where they try and try but cannot remember something they once knew very well. You may find you cannot recall the names of your family members or friends, or you may be standing in a room suddenly unaware of what you walked in there for. Some women also have difficulty reading or concentrating on work activities. Researchers are not sure why these troubling symptoms occur in postmenopausal women, but stress and fatigue may be the cause.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Follow the recommendations discussed in the section, Mood Swings.
- ✓ Exercise your brain! Keep your brain sharp by doing crossword puzzles, playing board games, trying a new computer program, or taking a class.
- ✓ Add “brain foods” to your diet, such as blueberries, fish, and beans.

Changes in Sexual Desire: Often postmenopausal women find that their interest in sex has decreased. This may be the result of the loss of estrogen, but it also could be related to lack of sleep, the pain that may accompany vaginal dryness, or a change in a women's attitude toward her body following surgery.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Talk with your partner about how you feel. Discuss your expectations and needs, and let your partner do the same. A new level of emotional closeness can inspire desire.
- ✓ Pamper your body. Buy new clothes, indulge in a spa day or a massage.
- ✓ Reduce your intake of coffee, tea, alcohol, citrus juices and other beverages that can irritate the bladder.

Dry Skin, Eyes and Hair: Estrogen is involved in the production of collagen and oils, so the loss of estrogen may cause your skin, eyes, and hair to become drier. Skin may seem to lose its elasticity, or become scaly or irritated. Hair may not be as shiny as it once was, and your eyes easily may become irritated.

What you can try on your own

- ✓ Stop smoking and reduce your intake of alcohol. Both can damage your skin.
- ✓ Use gentle, unscented soaps. Scented, antibacterial, and deodorant soaps are very hard on the skin.
- ✓ Drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. Make sure it's water, and not iced tea, coffee, soda, or any drink containing sweeteners.
- ✓ Eat salmon, mackerel, sardines, or other oily fish as often as you can.
- ✓ Exercise. It brings more oxygen to your skin which can increase the production of collagen.
- ✓ If your eyes are dry, make sure you take regular breaks when you're working at a computer, drawing, reading, knitting, or performing any kind of activity that requires intense visual concentration. Remind yourself to blink! If you wear contact lenses, switch to high-moisture lenses, or consider wearing glasses.

Ask your doctor

For extreme eye dryness, ask your doctor to recommend moisturizing eye drops. Visit your doctor regularly to monitor eye dryness and to help prevent possible damage to your eyes.