

What is Menopause?

Menopause is a natural part of life. The average age for menopause is 51. Symptoms can begin several years before your last period. Changing levels of estrogen and progesterone, two female hormones made in your ovaries, might lead to symptoms that can last for months or years after. Around the age of 40, you may notice that your period may be different—how long it lasts, how much you bleed, or how often. You may experience hot flashes day or night. Also, smoking can lead to early menopause.

Perimenopause often begins several years before your last menstrual period. It lasts for 1 year after your last period, the point in time known as menopause. A full year without a period is needed before you can say you have been “through menopause.” Postmenopause follows menopause and lasts the rest of your life.



Health New England *How Can We Help?*[™]

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What Are the Symptoms or Signs of Menopause?

The symptoms or signs of menopause vary for women. Because estrogen is used by many parts of your body, changes in how much estrogen you personally have may cause some or all of the following common symptoms:

CHANGES IN YOUR PERIOD

Your period may no longer be regular. You could have a lighter or heavier flow. These changes in your reproductive system are normal as you get older.

However, see your doctor if:

- your periods are coming very close together
- you have heavy bleeding or spotting
- your periods last more than a week

PROBLEMS WITH THE VAGINA AND BLADDER

Changing estrogen levels can cause your genital area to get drier and thinner, sometimes making sexual intercourse uncomfortable.

- Ask your doctor about using a water-based vaginal lubricant (not petroleum jelly) or a vaginal estrogen cream or tablet.

You may also notice more vaginal or urinary infections, and you might find it hard to hold urine long enough to get to the bathroom.

SEXUAL INTERCOURSE

Around the time of menopause you may find that your feelings about sex have changed. You can stop worrying about becoming pregnant after one full year without a period. But remember, you can't ever stop worrying about sexually-transmitted diseases.

HOT FLASHES

Due to changes in estrogen levels, hot flashes are very common. A hot flash is a sudden feeling of heat in the upper part or all of your body that can last between 30 seconds and 10 minutes. Your face and neck become flushed and red blotches may appear on your chest, back, and arms. Heavy sweating and cold shivering can follow. For some relief, try the following:

- Track hot flashes to determine the triggers, then try to avoid them.
- When a hot flash starts, go somewhere cool and/or have a cold drink like water or juice.
- If night sweats wake you, try sleeping in a cool room.
- Use sheets and clothing that let your skin breathe.
- Talk to your doctor about available medications to help manage your hot flashes.

SLEEP PROBLEMS

You might start having trouble falling asleep easily, or waking too early. Night sweats might wake you up.

MOOD CHANGES

You might find yourself more moody, irritable, or depressed around the time of menopause.

CHANGES IN YOUR BODY

You may experience changes such as: a larger waist, less muscle, fat gain, thin skin, memory problems and/or stiff achy muscles and joints.

- Do weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, jogging, or dancing at least 3 days a week for healthy bones and maintaining a healthy weight.

YOUR HEART AND BONES

HEART DISEASE

After menopause, women are more likely to develop heart disease. Changes in estrogen levels may be part of the cause. Talk to your doctor to find out what you should do to protect your heart.

OSTEOPOROSIS

Around the time of menopause women begin to lose Estrogen which helps control bone loss. Over time, bones can become weak and break easily. This condition is called osteoporosis. Talk to your doctor about preventive measures you can take such as, doing weight-bearing exercise, getting enough calcium or, taking supplements or medication.

HOW TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO

In order to make an informed decision about what is best for you, consider the following:

- Ask your doctor for information on managing menopause.
- Use the resource list on the back of this brochure to obtain information about hormone replacement therapy (HRT).
- Quit smoking!
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Exercise daily for at least 30 minutes.
- Get enough calcium and Vitamin D from your food or from vitamin/mineral supplements.
- Get regular pelvic and breast exams, Pap tests and Mammograms.
- Keep your blood pressure under control. If necessary, take medication as prescribed by your doctor.

Additional Resources

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Menopausal Hormone Therapy Information • nih.gov/PHTindex.htm

North American Menopause Society (NAMS)

P.O. Box 94527
Cleveland, OH 44101
1-440-442-7550 • menopause.org

National Institute on Aging Information Center (NIA)

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)
nia.nih.gov

Adapted from: National Institute on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Institutes of Health