Male menopause: understanding life’s stages

Both men and women go through life stages. In your 20s, you feel young and invincible. You go to school or work, spend lots of time with friends, and figure out who you are and where you want to go in life. In your 30s, you may focus on starting a family and building a career.



But by your mid- to late 40s, stability can set in. Your career is probably established, your family is growing up, and you may begin to see the physical signs of aging. Yet, rather than celebrating your accomplishments, you may find yourself in crisis—a mid-life crisis.

Even though mid-life changes may coincide with, and compound the effects of, male menopause, the two are not synonymous. Many men experience a decline in hormone levels—known as andropause—starting as early as their mid-thirties. Most men, however, receive a hormonal "reality check" in their mid-forties, when testosterone levels can diminish. This change not only affects men's sex lives, but their emotional health as well.

Some doctors argue that this condition is not an inevitable part of the aging process, because it doesn't occur in all men or come on as suddenly as female menopause. However, andropause, or male menopause, is a physical condition that affects many men, and one that can and should be addressed and dealt with.

What is andropause?

Andropause, also known as male menopause, occurs in men starting as early as age 35. Unlike the sudden drop in estrogen experienced by women in menopause, andropause begins with gradual hormonal and physiological changes. Men experience a decline in testosterone, thyroid, growth hormone (GH) and DHEA. This can cause a man's skin to sag, energy levels to drop and sexual stamina to diminish.

Signs of andropause include:

- Memory loss
- Decreased bone density
- Weight gain
- Decreased energy and strength
- Emotional changes, such as irritability, anxiety and depression
- Sexual changes, such as reduced sexual desire, erectile dysfunction or difficulties ejaculating
- Sleep disturbances

Why is testosterone so important?

Testosterone plays a vital role in men's health. The pituitary gland produces hormones that travel through the blood stream to the testicles, where they stimulate the testicles to produce testosterone and sperm. This testosterone regulates sex drive and the reproductive organs; helps maintain muscle strength; and affects the skin, liver, bones, heart, prostrate and mental functioning.

Approximately 20 per cent of men over the age of 50 will have clinical signs of testosterone insufficiency. This medical condition is linked to depression, fatigue, reduced lean body mass and muscle strength, decreased bone density, a lower interest in sex and erectile dysfunction.

Staying healthy through andropause

Although you may not be able to completely ward off the onset or effects of male menopause, research has shown that excessive alcohol consumption, obesity, smoking, hypertension, poor diet and lack of exercise can contribute to this condition. If you (or someone you know) show some of the signs of andropause noted above, consider:

- **Visiting your doctor.** Discuss the symptoms you are experiencing and have your testosterone levels checked. If testosterone levels are low, your doctor might prescribe testosterone replacement therapy.
- **Exercising regularly.**
- **Limiting caffeine and alcohol consumption.**
- **Finding ways to relieve and manage stress.**
- **Talking to someone.** Discuss your condition with a friend, your partner, your doctor or a counsellor.
- **Reducing your meat consumption.** Many types of meat are "fattened up" with female hormones like estrogen. If men eat a lot of meat, it can reduce their levels of the male hormone testosterone.
- **Reducing your saturated fat intake to lessen the risk of prostate cancer.** Studies indicate that men who eat more than 30 grams of saturated fat (meat and dairy) a day have twice the risk of developing prostate cancer as do men who eat only 11 grams of saturated fat a day.
- **Drinking plenty of water.**

Remember that symptoms of low testosterone levels don't have to be accepted as a normal part of aging, so seek medical advice. Although andropause is a physical condition, it can have far-reaching psychological, interpersonal, social and spiritual effects, so be sure to discuss your condition with someone whom you trust and can rely on for support.