Understanding menopause

Menopause is the natural stage in a woman's life that marks the end of childbearing and menstrual bleeding. Unlike a woman’s first menstruation, which starts on a single day, the changes leading up to menopause happen over several years.



The average age for menopause is 52, but menopause commonly happens any time between the ages of 42 and 56. A woman can say she has begun her menopause when she has not had a period for a full year.

What is it?

Menopause is a natural process that happens to every woman as she grows older, and is **not** a medical problem, disease or illness. Still, some women may have a hard time because of the changes in hormone levels during menopause.

Signs and symptoms

There are many possible symptoms of menopause and each woman feels them differently. Most women have few or no menopausal symptoms, while some women may have many moderate or severe symptoms.

The clearest signs of the start of menopause are irregular periods (when periods come closer together or further apart), and when blood flow becomes lighter or heavier. Other signs may include some of the following:

- Weight gain
- Hot flashes
- Insomnia
- Night sweats
- Vaginal dryness
- Joint pain
- Fatigue
- Short-term memory problems
- Bowel upset
- Dry eyes
- Itchy skin
- Mood swings
- Urinary tract infections

Most of the time, these symptoms will lessen or go away after a woman has finished menopause. If any of these symptoms make you feel uncomfortable, talk to your doctor. There are many ways to reduce symptoms, both through medication and alternative therapies.

Treating symptoms

If your symptoms are giving you discomfort, your doctor may recommend Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which provides almost instant relief from many symptoms by replacing the hormones that you are losing.

Different HRTs contain different levels of estrogen and progesterone, obtained from different sources. Your doctor will recommend the best type for you. Some women are not suitable candidates for HRT. Your doctor will discuss this with you. Unsuitable candidates for HRT may include women with a personal or family history of breast cancer, or women with unexplained vaginal bleeding or active liver disease.

Some alternative medicine treatments also appear to be effective. These may include herbal remedies to reduce symptoms, taken by mouth, or in some cases rubbed into the skin as a cream.

Self-care

There are also some remedies that you can try for yourself to lessen your menopausal symptoms. Consider trying the following:

- Hot flashes may be reduced when you limit your intake of spicy foods, caffeine and alcohol.
- Some women find that soy products (soy milk, tofu, etc.) and whole-grain foods bring relief. This may be due to the estrogen-like effects of the phytoestrogens contained in these foods.
- Exercise may decrease hot flashes and help keep your heart and bones strong.
- If you find that confined spaces increase your hot flashes, try to avoid them.

While menopause can be a difficult and uncomfortable stage of life for many women, there are steps you can take to try and alleviate your symptoms and discomfort. Please note: this article is not intended to replace professional consultation. Please see your doctor for all medical concerns.