

Perimenopause and You

Menopause and You

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What is it?

Though the words “perimenopausal” and “menopausal” are often used, their meaning isn’t always well-defined. So let’s start there, with definitions. “Peri” is a prefix meaning around or near, and perimenopause is the transitional time a woman goes through before menopause. Its length is variable, and its most common symptom is irregular menstrual cycles. This can mean periods that are closer together, further apart, heavier, or lighter. An increasing number of periods are missed, usually in an unpredictable fashion. Generally, it takes women four years to go through this transition, but that may vary. A woman is in menopause when she has not had a period for a full year.

Many women have other perimenopausal symptoms, including hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, and vaginal dryness. Hot flashes are sudden feelings of heat in the upper body. They may be accompanied by chills, and usually last less than five minutes. Night sweats are flashes that occur during sleeping, and cause women to wake up.

The cause of flashes is unclear, but may be changes in the body’s temperature-regulating mechanism. Dressing in layers and avoiding triggers such as stress, cigarettes, alcohol, and spicy or hot foods are

good ways to start managing flashes. Oral contraceptives, for the appropriate candidate, have the benefit of lessening flashes, and also provide contraception and regulate menstrual flow. Estrogen is not generally recommended for use in the perimenopause. However, it can be used for brief periods, particularly in women who have flashes in the week before their period. Herbal remedies, because of their lack of standardization as well as the possibility that they may interact badly with other medications, are not routinely recommended.

Mood swings and depression are not the same thing. Women can have mood swings and irritability for many reasons. An interrupted night’s sleep because of flashes can cause a short temper, as can life situations—teenagers, aging parents, and job stress, to name a few. By and large, perimenopausal women are no more depressed than anyone else. The one exception is women with a history of depression. This is a time in their lives when it may recur or become more pronounced. If a woman is significantly depressed, antidepressants and therapy are helpful.

Fluctuating levels of estrogen can lead to vaginal dryness. This, in turn, can lead to discomfort during intercourse and may be related to increased incontinence - the loss of bladder control. While it is a common myth that perimenopausal women have less of an interest in sex, this is not the case for all women. Some of the change in desire for sex may be because of the discomfort. Over-the-counter lubricants can improve vaginal dryness. Estrogen, used vaginally in the form of a cream, ring, or tablet can be used if lubricants fail. Increased sexual intercourse may also be helpful since it increases blood supply to the vagina, which in turn improves lubrication.

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This is intended as an information resource providing guidelines for women. As always, check with your own healthcare practitioner with your specific concerns and questions.

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Another reason for a change in the desire for sex may be the commonly held belief that older people are not sexual. However, most women find no change in their interest in sex, and some women have an increased interest. Perimenopausal women still need contraceptives to prevent pregnancy. The likelihood of pregnancy is small, but it is possible. There are many contraceptive options available—talk with your healthcare provider about the best one for you.

When Is It?

Women often want to know where they are in their perimenopausal transition—when will they become menopausal? Most women will begin perimenopause in their 40s, but that is a large span of time. Many look for medical tests to give them some guideposts. Unfortunately, there is no one test that can accurately give this information. The markers most often requested are FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) and estrogen. The brain produces FSH to cause the ovary to ovulate (release an egg). In menopause, FSH is elevated, but in perimenopause it fluctuates from week to week, making it unreliable for diagnosis. Estrogen levels are low in menopause, but in perimenopause the level can be low, high or normal. The diagnosis of perimenopause is based on symptoms, not bloodwork.

A New Chapter

This time in a woman's life is really a beginning rather than an end. It is an opportunity to reassess lifestyles and make changes that benefit your health.

- Stop smoking. It can cause more intense flashes, an earlier menopause, weaken your bones, and thin the skin (more wrinkles!).

- Exercise more. This will promote good heart and bone health. You will be stronger, have more energy, and improve your mood.

- Eat well. You need smaller portions and fewer calories. Obesity is directly linked to diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Choosing a low-fat diet and exercising can keep the pounds from creeping on as your metabolism slows down a bit with age. Other healthy eating habits:

- Increase the fiber in your diet with fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. This may not only improve cholesterol but can decrease the risk for colon cancer.

- Add omega 3 and 6 fatty acids. These, too, have a positive impact on cardiac health. Salmon, sardines, mackerel, walnuts, and flax seed are good sources.

- Your calcium intake should total 1000-1200 milligrams daily. Dairy products, juices with calcium, dark green vegetables, tofu and nuts are a good place to start. In order to achieve the daily total, you may need a calcium supplement as well.

- Make sure your cancer screening is up to date. Pap smears, mammograms and colorectal cancer screening are all important. Discuss the frequency of these with your healthcare provider.

- Have your cholesterol checked. Heart disease remains the #1 cause of death for women in this country. Cholesterol should be checked every five years, or more often if your healthcare provider recommends.

- Play and laugh more! Reduction of stress will have short and long term benefits.

“This time in a woman's life is really a beginning rather than an end.”

Main Line Health

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