

## Understanding menopause and midlife

### What is menopause?

Menopause is the last menstrual (monthly) period and is a natural part of every woman's life. It means the end of a woman's reproductive years, just as the first menstrual period, means the start. Most women reach menopause between the ages of 45 and 55.

Menopause symptoms can begin gradually over 2 to 6 years before the last menstrual period. This time is called perimenopause - from the time periods become irregular until the first year after that final period.

### Will all women have menopause symptoms?

- 20 per cent of women have no symptoms
- 60 per cent have mild symptoms
- 20 per cent have severe symptoms

### What is early (Premature) menopause?

Menopause, before the age of 40, is called early or 'premature menopause'. It may occur:

- naturally when the ovaries have stopped working
- surgically when a woman has her ovaries removed
- chemically from chemotherapy/radiotherapy for cancer

Women who experience early menopause are at greater risk of osteoporosis and heart disease because of the long term effects of low oestrogen levels. If you think you are experiencing early menopause it is important to talk to your doctor.

### What happens to your body at menopause?

As we approach menopause, the production of hormones (i.e. oestrogen) by the ovaries slows down. During this time hormone levels change more and often you may notice these changes in your menstrual cycle (period).

- periods may become longer, shorter or irregular
- bleeding may become lighter
- bleeding may become unpredictable and heavy (see your doctor)

Eventually hormone levels will decrease so that menstruation (periods) will stop altogether and menopause is reached. Birth control is needed until you have had one year without a natural period.

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## Other signs and symptoms

As your hormone levels fluctuate and finally stop, you may begin to experience some of the following physical and emotional symptoms:

- hot flushes and night sweats
- aches and pains
- crawling or itching sensations under the skin
- headaches
- vaginal dryness
- reduced sex drive (libido)
- urinary frequency
- tiredness
- irritability
- depression
- sleeping difficulty
- lack of self esteem
- forgetfulness

## How can you help yourself?

### (1) Healthy Eating

- fresh vegetables, fruits, cereals and whole grains
- increase fluids (6-8 glasses water daily)
- decrease caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate)
- limit alcohol, 1-2 standard glasses or less, per day
- low fat dairy foods with high calcium content
- small servings of lean meat, fish or chicken several times a week
- phytoestrogens (plant oestrogens)
  - regularly include a variety of foods containing phytoestrogens. Best sources are soy and linseed bread, soy beans, tofu, whole grains and legumes
  - these weak plant oestrogens replace some natural oestrogens lost during menopause, and may reduce symptoms. They also reduce cholesterol and blood pressure

### (2) Regular Physical Activity

30 MINUTES OF MODERATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON MOST DAYS OF THE WEEK.

- maintains heart health as well as general health
- helps control weight gain- as you age your metabolism slows down
- appropriate weight bearing exercises (eg. walking briskly, dancing) and strength training exercises (eg. using weights) helps keep bones healthy, maintain muscle strength and reduce bone loss. It also helps maintain good balance and reduces the risk of injury from falls
- provides a feeling of relaxation and wellbeing helping us to cope better with stress in our lives

### (3) Avoid smoking



#### **(4) Looking after your emotional health**

Some women experience mood changes such as mild depression and irritability. These symptoms are often related to physical changes such as hot flushes, night sweats and poor sleeping.

Lifestyle changes and controlling physical symptoms will often improve general wellbeing. You might also want to talk to a health professional.

#### **(5) Regular Pap smear and breast checks**

- 2 yearly Pap smear (see your health professional)
- 2 yearly mammogram (free service if you are over 40 years of age, reminders sent over 50 years of age)

Phone: 13 20 50 for an appointment at the BreastScreen centre nearest to you.

### **What therapies can help you manage menopause symptoms?**

#### **Hormone Therapy (HT) (also known as Hormone Replacement Therapy – HRT):**

Hormone therapy helps relieve the symptoms of menopause.

Short term use of hormone therapy for the management of menopause symptoms that affect a woman's quality of life is a reasonable option. However, no treatment is without risk.

Any decision about HT is an individual one and should be made after each woman has talked to her doctor about her risks, benefits, concerns and other alternatives.

It is important that all women using HT be reviewed once a year by their doctor.

Natural Therapies:

Natural therapies include many different therapies or approaches such as herbal remedies, acupuncture, homeopathy and traditional Chinese medicine and are often used by women to manage menopause symptoms. It is important to remember that 'natural' herb and plant medications can have unpleasant side effects in some women, as can prescribed western medications. For long term guidance it is important to see a qualified naturopath.

Natural therapies can often be taken in conjunction with hormone therapy. It is important to let both your doctor and naturopath know exactly what each has prescribed.

For further information or to attend an information sessions in your language, please contact The Jean Hailes Foundation Education Unit on 1800 151 441