

Menopause in Survivorship

What is menopause?

Menopause is the time of a woman's life when menstruation stops. It is a process in which the ovaries produce fewer hormones, which cause menstrual periods to become irregular and eventually stop completely.

Menopause naturally occurs between ages 45 and 60. The average age is 51. However, menopause can also occur in women less than 45 years of age whose ovaries are surgically removed or have stopped functioning for other reasons.

In women treated for cancer, menopause may occur early and may even occur during treatment. Following treatment, many women may experience temporary menopause, which means menstrual periods may stop and then start again. This is because some chemotherapy can cause damage to the ovaries which may be reversible. As a result, women with cancer may experience some symptoms of menopause.

What are the symptoms of menopause?

There can be physical and psychological symptoms of menopause. Some women will experience some of these symptoms or no symptoms at all. The symptoms can last a short time or can last for months or even years.

Physical symptoms may include:

- Irregular menstrual periods
- Hot flashes (also called flushes) or night sweats
- Disturbed sleep patterns and insomnia
- Dry skin
- Fast or irregular heartbeat (palpitations)
- Loss of bone density
- Weight gain
- Vaginal dryness and shrinkage of genital tissues
- Discomfort or pain during sexual intercourse
- Susceptibility to minor vaginal and urinary infections

Emotional symptoms may include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Tearfulness
- Irritability
- Less desire for sex
- Lack of concentration
- Poor memory

How are the symptoms of menopause managed?

Treatment options are available and may differ based on other medical issues and cancer history.

- For hot flashes, there are several medicines that can be helpful such as:
 - Hormonal therapy is the most effective therapy with estrogen +/-progesterone replacement. However, there are relative contraindications to taking hormone replacement therapy including a history of a heart attack, stroke or blood clot as well as a history of breast cancer and some gynecologic cancers as well. This should be discussed with your health care provider.
 - Anti-seizure medicines
 - Blood pressure medicine
 - Anticholinergics
 - Fezolinetant (veozah)
- For vaginal dryness, there are things that can be helpful as well:
 - Vaginal estrogens - This is any form of estrogen that goes directly into the vagina. It comes as creams, tablets, or a flexible ring. Vaginal estrogen comes in small doses that don't increase the levels of estrogen in other parts of the body very much. Discuss this with your physician.
 - Vaginal moisturizers - (sample brand names: Replens, K-Y SILK-E, Revaree, Luvena, etc.) several times a week. These do not contain hormones and are supplied in either a vaginal cream or suppository. They help keep the vagina moist all of the time. You can also add a lubricant (sample brand names: Astroglide, K-Y Jelly) when you have sex.

What can I do to reduce the symptoms of menopause?

- Stay hydrated
- Eat a balanced diet high in calcium, such as dark green vegetables and nonfat (skim) milk, dairy products and vitamin E.
- Quit smoking, if you smoke. Smoking makes hot flashes worse. If you are having trouble quitting, your doctor or nurse can help.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon, and limit alcohol.
- Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day, even when you don't sleep well.
- Try to stay active. Exercise can help your mood.
- Wear cotton sleepwear to reduce discomfort from night sweats.
- Use fans and open windows to keep air moving.
- Treatments that change how you deal with stress, anxiety, and negative feelings may help you manage hot flashes. These strategies include cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, relaxation and breathing exercises. They help you gain a sense of control and develop coping skills to manage your symptoms.
- Some research has suggested that acupuncture might be helpful in treating hot flashes, although not all studies have found this.
- Some women find that losing weight helps with menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes.
- Use herbs and dietary supplements with caution as there may be little data that these are effective, and they may interact with your other medicines. Be sure to discuss this with your health care team.
- Stay connected. Keep in touch with friends and family and consider joining a support group for women going through menopause.

These are some suggestions for coping with menopause which is a natural part of aging. However, if you are having a difficult time managing, please speak with your health care provider.