The Menopause

The facts about the menopause, HRT and osteoporosis

NHS

Health Promotion England
The menopause is a time of change in your body, and often in your life too.

You may find this a time to enjoy and take control of your life, when you have more time and energy for yourself. Or you may find that the changes taking place in your life make you feel anxious or low.

What is the menopause?

The aim of this leaflet is to start to answer your questions about the menopause, including what causes it, what changes are happening in your body, and how these changes may affect the way you feel. It provides the basic facts about osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) – see page 11 – and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) – see page 14.

And it also gives you practical self-help tips on:

- who to talk to,
- how to cope with the symptoms of the menopause,
- questions you might want to ask your GP or practice nurse.

What is HRT?

Can osteoporosis be treated?
The menopause

The menopause is the name given to the stage of life during which your periods stop. It is sometimes called the 'change of life' or just 'the change'. It's a natural process that every woman goes through, and every woman's experience of the menopause is different.

What is the menopause?
The menopause is the end of your regular periods. But the term is also used to refer to the stage of life during which this happens.

When will it happen to me?
It usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55, although it can happen earlier or later.

What causes it?
The monthly cycle is controlled by two natural chemicals called hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. These prepare the body for pregnancy each month. When pregnancy doesn't occur, you have a period.

As you grow older, your ovaries are less able to produce eggs each month and the level of oestrogen falls. Your periods will probably become irregular and unpredictable, until they finally stop altogether.

What are the symptoms?
Hot flushes, night sweats and feeling emotional are all common symptoms of the menopause. They are caused by hormonal changes and vary from woman to woman. They may start before your periods stop, or develop several years later. They may be mild or they may be unpleasant and distressing. Irregular periods are another common sign that the menopause is approaching.

Irregular periods
Your periods may become erratic and unpredictable some months or years before they actually stop. The flow might start to vary, from heavy one month to light the next. If your periods are very irregular or very heavy, see your GP or practice nurse.

'It seemed to go on and on. I had heavy periods, hot flushes, mood swings, the lot. I thought it would all end when my periods stopped, but it was years before I felt myself again.'
• Hot flushes and night sweats
These can occur any time before or during the menopause. They can be uncomfortable, but they are not harmful. Some women have none at all.

Hot flushes and sweats usually happen in the week of your period in the lead up to the menopause. After your periods have stopped, they may happen more frequently.

Hot flushes can happen on and off throughout the day, and may affect your sleep at night. They are probably caused by hormonal changes, but the exact cause is not known. You feel a wave of heat passing over your body, sometimes accompanied by redness, sweating or tingling. This can last for a number of seconds or up to several minutes. You may also feel a little faint and dizzy, and you may feel your heart beating faster.

Sweats can happen with or without a flush, usually at night. After sweating, you can feel very cold. Night sweats can make it very hard to get a good night’s rest.

• Dryness in the vagina
Your vagina may become drier, which can make sex painful or uncomfortable and increases the risk of vaginal infection. There may also be an increased risk of cystitis (bladder infection). If you notice any unusual discharge from your vagina, this may be a sign of infection and you should see your GP.

‘The worst thing about the flushes is the embarrassment. You can feel your face turning bright red, and you wonder what on earth people are thinking.’

• Feeling emotional
At this stage in their lives, many women experience symptoms such as headaches, forgetfulness, irritability and feeling low. For some, it is the worst aspect of the menopause. As well as struggling with your own feelings, you may also worry about the effect of your mood swings on the people around you.

The changes in your body may certainly be responsible for some of these feelings. Mood changes may become worse around the time of your periods, for example due to increased premenstrual tension. But there may be other reasons for feeling emotional or down, particularly due to the changes and stresses in your life.

If you do feel depressed, find someone sympathetic to talk to. This could help you understand why you are feeling the way you are. You could try talking to friends or relations who have gone through the menopause, your GP or your practice nurse. Some of the organisations listed on pages 18–19 might also be able to help.

‘What scares me most is the depression. I don’t find my GP very easy to talk to, and I’ve no idea where else I could go for help.’
What can I do to help myself?

Some women have little or no trouble with the menopause. Don’t assume it’s going to be awful — every woman has a different experience. Even if you do have problems, there’s a lot you can do to help yourself.

- **Be prepared** If you experience sweating at night, try lying on a large towel and use cotton night clothes and sheets. Keep a fan and bottle of cold water by your bed. If you get hot flushes throughout the day, wear layers of clothing that you can take on and off. Deep breathing can help to ‘cool down’ hot flushes.

- **Eat a healthy, balanced diet** Eating sensibly and well is important for good health and for the prevention of osteoporosis (see page 11).

- **Avoid smoking** If you smoke, try to quit. Smoking may make the menopause start about one year earlier. It also increases the risk of osteoporosis and heart disease.

- **Stay active** Regular physical activity can also help you feel better. Try to treat this as a time to relax and reduce stress in your life.

- **Use a vaginal lubricant** If dryness in your vagina makes sex painful or difficult, try using a lubricant such as KY jelly, available from any chemist.

- **Consider Hormone Replacement Therapy** It can bring significant relief to menopausal symptoms, including hot flushes, night sweats and nervous tension (see page 14).

- **Alternative therapies** Some women find that alternative or complementary treatments like aromatherapy can help ease their symptoms and make them feel more relaxed. However, there is no scientific agreement on whether these treatments actually work.

---

Who can I talk to?
If your symptoms are making you uncomfortable or miserable, you don’t have to put up with it. You could talk to your GP, practice nurse or occupational health nurse, or go along to a well woman clinic. They’ll be able to explain the different options for treatment, including hormone replacement therapy.

See page 10 for a list of questions you could ask. The organisations listed at the back of this leaflet may also be able to help (turn to pages 18–19).

When can I stop using contraception?
It’s best to discuss this with your doctor or family planning clinic. Generally, women under 50 are advised to wait until they have had no periods for two years before stopping their method of contraception. Women over 50 should wait one year.

Remember that ‘natural’ methods of birth control such as safe times or temperature monitoring are not reliable once your periods become irregular. Also, some forms of the pill might not be advisable around the time of the menopause, especially if you smoke. Again, discuss appropriate methods with your GP or family planning clinic. The Contraceptive Education Service will also be able to give you advice and information (see page 18).