

Menopause

Definition

Menopause is a natural part of ageing and a time in a woman's life when she is no longer having monthly periods and cannot get pregnant naturally. This can only be identified retrospectively, but is often preceded by several months of erratic (non-regular), often heavy periods. The time when periods are not always regular, and for up to one year after the last period is termed the perimenopause.

In the UK the average age for the menopause to happen is 51 years, but it can occur anytime from 45 – 55 years of age. But around 1 in 100 women experience the menopause before 40 years of age. This is known as premature menopause or premature ovarian insufficiency.

Causes

Oestrogen is produced by the ovaries each month as the eggs inside the ovaries grow, but as women age, their ovaries do not respond to hormones in the usual way and do not produce an egg every month, until all of the eggs are used up (=menopause). This means that there are less oestrogens in a woman's body during this time and oestrogen levels fall to a 'new normal' level. During this time that the woman's body is adjusting to the 'new normal' level of oestrogens, she may experience symptoms, commonly called menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes.

Symptoms

Women experience what are termed 'menopausal symptoms' because of reduced oestrogen levels circulating in the blood. Once the oestrogen levels in your blood are low enough the lining of the womb is not stimulated to grow and so your periods stop.

Other symptoms can include:

- hot flashes
- night sweats
- vaginal dryness / itching and discomfort during sex
- difficulty sleeping
- low mood or anxiety
- mood swings
- lack of energy
- reduced sex drive (libido)
- problems with memory and concentration
- needing to go to the toilet often
- Urinary and vaginal infections

These symptoms are perfectly normal, but in some cases can really interfere with the quality of everyday life. They can begin months or even years before your periods stop and last around 4 years after your last period, although in some women they continue for much longer.

A long-term consequence of the menopause, due to reduced hormone (oestrogen) levels is reduction in bone strength – this can result in osteoporosis. So, it is important to consider other conditions and to reduce any risk factors that the woman may have to minimise the risk.

Treatment

There are treatments available to help, so if you have menopausal symptoms that are troubling you or if you're experiencing symptoms of the menopause before 45 years of age, consult your GP or healthcare provider (HCP).

Your description of the symptoms you are experiencing is usually sufficient for an HCP to confirm whether you're menopausal, but a blood test to measure your hormone levels may be carried out if you're under 45.

To help you manage your symptoms, your HCP can offer lifestyle advice, cognitive behavioural therapy, vaginal oestrogen for vaginal dryness, or creams, lubricants or moisturisers. Your HCP may suggest medical treatment such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or other non-hormonal treatments to help with certain symptoms. HRT is not suitable for all women (such as those that have previously had some conditions like breast cancer) and so it is important that you discuss your personal situation with your HCP, so that you can receive the most appropriate treatment. Any treatment recommended will be reviewed regularly to ensure that you still need it and that it is still the most appropriate treatment for you.

Complementary and alternative therapies are widely available and have been used, especially since many HRT products have had supply issues. However, complementary and alternative treatments, such as herbal remedies and bioidentical ("natural") hormones, are not recommended for managing symptoms of the menopause, because it's generally unclear how safe and effective they are.

Some 'herbal/natural' remedies can also interact with other medications and cause side effects, so ask your GP or pharmacist for advice if you're thinking about using a complementary therapy.