



WHAT TO EXPECT

Understanding Menopause

Perimenopause means "around menopause." It refers to the 2 to 8 years of changing hormone levels leading up to menopause. The most common sign of perimenopause is longer, often irregular menstrual cycles that are caused by hormonal ups and downs.

Most women start perimenopause between ages 39 and 51. Some women begin to notice menstrual changes and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms in their late 30s, when hormone levels begin to change and fertility naturally declines. Other women don't notice menopause changes until their late 40s.

What are the symptoms of menopause?

During the months or years leading up to menopause, irregular menstrual cycles can lead to heavy menstrual bleeding (dysfunctional uterine bleeding). Other common symptoms include mild to severe hot flashes, insomnia, cloudy thinking, headaches, heart palpitations, mood swings, irritability, depression, and anxiety. These symptoms can begin well before menopause and can last for a year or more afterward. Symptoms are different for every woman - some notice few or no changes, while others have severe symptoms that disrupt their sleep and daily lives.



Perimenopause refers to the 2 to 8 years of changing hormone levels leading up to menopause. Most women start perimenopause between the ages of 39 and 51.

Estrogen steadily drops for several months before and after menopause. As it does, it's common for menopause symptoms to get worse. Over time, hormones even out, and symptoms usually improve or go away. Some women have ongoing symptoms, such as hot flashes, for years after menopause. When estrogen levels drop below a certain point, many women develop vaginal dryness and irritation, which can continue into the postmenopausal years. Fortunately, this symptom can be treated easily.



How do I know whether I am in perimenopause, menopause, or postmenopause?

You don't need to test hormone levels to diagnose perimenopause or menopause. You and your health professional will most likely be able to tell when you are in perimenopause based on irregular menstrual periods. (This most often happens between ages 39 and 51.) You may also have various physical and emotional symptoms.

If you have heavy, irregular bleeding, your health professional may want to rule out any serious causes of your symptoms. In many women in their 40s, heavy menstrual bleeding is a sign of perimenopause. However, it can be caused by infection, disease, or a pregnancy complication.

When you have had no menstrual periods for 1 year, you have reached menopause.

Menopause is the end of a woman's menstrual cycle and fertility and is a normal condition that all women experience as they age. It occurs when the ovaries no longer produce estrogen and progesterone, two necessary hormones for a woman's reproductive cycle to function.

Though it naturally occurs with age, menopause may also come on suddenly as a result of a surgical procedure, treatment of a disease, or illness. In these cases it is referred to as induced menopause.

When Do Women Usually Enter Menopause?

When menopause occurs naturally, it tends to take place anywhere between the ages of 40 and 58, with an average age of 51. But for some women it can occur as early as the late 30s, or as late as your 60s. When menopause occurs before 35, it is considered premature menopause, but just as menarche is genetically predetermined, so is menopause.

What Are the Symptoms of Menopause?

For many women who enter menopause, their menstrual cycle becomes irregular and then stops, and they don't have any other symptoms. But, for others, the decreasing levels of estrogen associated with menopause may cause more distressing symptoms that include:

- Mood swings
- Decreased sex drive
- Hot flashes
- Sweating
- Racing heart (palpitations)
- Headaches
- Vaginal dryness and soreness
- Trouble sleeping
- Bone thinning (osteoporosis)

These symptoms can last from a few months to up to 10 years. As women in our day and age, we have a wide range of responsibilities and duties, and we want to feel our best and maintain our quality of life. That is why many women choose to use some form of prescription hormone replacement therapy (HRT). With all of the media controversy surrounding HRT, many women are hesitant to use prescription therapy due to fear of associations with malignancy, irregular bleeding, or other side effects. Instead, they look for alternative ways to self-manage the symptoms and long-term consequences of menopause, such as the increased risk of heart attack and osteoporosis. Consult your physician to determine which therapy is right for you.

