

MENOPAUSE: A PRIMER

Menopause happens to all women the world over. Like menstruation, it's an unavoidable physiological change and although menopause signals the end of monthly periods and therefore child-bearing years, for many it represents a liberating time in their lives.

Most women stop having periods in their 50s. For some it may happen earlier and for others, later. This cessation occurs because the ovaries are producing less of the sex hormones, progesterone and estrogen and as a result, periods become irregular and eventually stop entirely.

Is it hot or is it me?

The time leading up to menopause is referred to as peri-menopause. When periods disappear completely, women are said to be postmenopausal. The most common complaint of women in any stage of menopause is the hot flash or flush. Although flashes usually begin during peri-menopause, for many they continue into menopause, and for some, last a lifetime albeit in a diminished form. Spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol and hot drinks are known to exacerbate the condition, as do hot rooms and stress. When flashes occur while sleeping, it is referred to as night sweats; the average duration is from 30 seconds to several minutes.

The consequent lack of hormone production may also affect the digestive system, blood vessels, urinary tract, breasts, vagina, bones and skin. Signs and symptoms are inconsistent sleep patterns, memory loss, irritability, vaginal dryness and a thinning of the lining of the urethra that may lead to an increased frequency of urination.

With menopause affecting no two women in the same manner, other complaints may include heart palpitations, decreased sexual desire, joint and muscle pain, depression, difficulty concentrating, headaches, dizziness, fatigue, increased fat around the waist, dry skin and hair.

Hormones on the rampage

Hormonal changes also bring more serious health risks such as heart disease and osteoporosis. Though the process of decreasing bone mass occurs throughout a lifetime, it speeds up after

menopause causing bones to become more brittle and thus more prone to breaking, especially the wrists, spine and hips. Women are typically less vulnerable than men to heart disease until menopause, when the risk increases for women.

For many years, Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) was the tool women were most commonly prescribed to battle the effects of menopause. In 2001, when the results of The Million Women Study were released (a survey of women's health involving more than one million UK women aged 50 years and over) it was clear that there was a direct link between HRT and breast cancer. Most recently the therapy has been linked to ovarian cancer and may also increase the risk of heart disease, stroke and blood clots. Many women and their doctors have abandoned HRT.

Supplements to the rescue

Long before HRT, women dealt with menopause through diet and exercise. This still remains the first line of defense. It has been proven that exercise can assist in reducing the severity of menopausal symptoms in addition to significantly lowering the risk of heart disease and many forms of cancer. Exercise also relieves stress and lessens the symptoms of depression and anxiety. The loss of bone mass can be significantly lowered through exercise, too.

Women have also been increasingly turning to natural remedies including natural progesterone derived from soybeans, black cohosh and soy isoflavones. Other herbal remedies that have recently witnessed increased popularity are ginseng and phytoestrogens. Calcium is thought to help slow bone loss; fish oil is helpful for secondary prevention of coronary artery disease and grape seed extract can blunt hypertension.

More than skin deep

By the time women are post-menopausal, the largest organ in the body -- the skin -- has taken a beating, not just from smoking, drinking and pollution but also from the sun, which can lay claim to 80 per cent of the skin's visible aging. A mere 10 per cent of the skin's aging is attributed to genetics. Even if you have been a devoted sunscreen user, these products can only provide limited sun protection. In short, once the damage has been done, topical formulations cannot rebuild the skin.

Although menopause in all its permutations is part of the long-term plan for every woman, there exists ways and means to lessen its negative impact. Research is ongoing, but diet, supplements and exercise are among the first tools easily employed to deal with the symptoms.

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