

Patient information

What is the menopause?

The menopause is when a woman stops having periods as she reaches the end of her natural reproductive life (NICE 2015).

This is usually a gradual process in which women experience **peri-menopausal*** changes before reaching **post-menopause*** when periods become irregular and stop with the end of fertility (ability to have a baby naturally).

The average age of the menopause is 51 in the UK (normal age range 45 - 57) but around 1 in 100 women become menopausal before the age of 40. This is known as premature ovarian insufficiency (POI), which can be caused by surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, genetic, auto-immune or unknown reasons.

- ***Peri-menopause:** the period from the beginning of menopausal symptoms to the post-menopause.
- ***Post-menopause:** defined when there have been no periods for twelve months or immediately after surgical removal of the ovaries.

Signs and symptoms

You may experience some or all of the symptoms below:

- Irregular periods, absent periods, heavy bleeding
- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Tiredness
- Mood changes, low mood, anxiety, irritability
- Brain fog
- Low self esteem

- Decreased sex drive
- Poor sleep
- Bladder issues
- Vaginal problems including increase in infections
- Vaginal dryness and / or soreness
- Changes in skin and hair
- Joint pains

Some women also experience longer term problems such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease.

If you suffer any of these symptoms you should discuss them with your GP or doctor.

How can I improve my symptoms?

There are a number of things which you can do to improve your menopausal symptoms, some are detailed below:

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

Types:

- **Oestrogen-only HRT:** This is usually only recommended following a hysterectomy (surgical removal of the womb/uterus).
- **Combined HRT:** Consists of oestrogen and progestogen.

Oestrogen taken on its own can cause abnormal thickening of the lining of the womb / uterus which can cause bleeding. Progestogen in the form of tablets, patches or a hormone-containing coil will prevent this, so if you have a womb / uterus you will need a combined treatment.

HRT is taken as a sequential combined HRT (with a regular monthly withdrawal bleed) for peri-menopausal women and as a continuously combined HRT (without a bleed) for post-menopausal women. You may experience some vaginal bleeding in the first 3 months of starting or changing HRT but after this it should stop. If you experience any unscheduled bleeding after 3 months see your GP immediately.

HRT is available as tablets, patches, gel or intrauterine progestogen. Vaginal oestrogen for local treatment of vaginal dryness is also available as a cream, pessary or ring that is placed inside your vagina.

Benefits of HRT

The main benefits of HRT are that it helps to relieve menopausal symptoms.

HRT can also help in the prevention of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease in peri and post-menopausal women.

Risks of HRT

The risks of taking HRT are different for each woman and are dependent on factors such as age, weight, medical and family history. There is a small increase in breast cancer with combined HRT (NICE 2015) which increases with the duration of treatment. Some types of tablet HRT can increase the risks of blood clots and stroke (this risk is less with transdermal use of HRT where it is given through the skin).

The benefits usually outweigh the risks for most women. It is important to speak to your GP or consultant to help you decide if HRT is the right treatment for you and to discuss the options available to enable you to make an informed choice.

Alternatives to HRT

Lifestyle changes

- **Regular exercise** can reduce hot flushes and help sleep. Weight bearing exercises help keep your bones strong. Frequent exercise can help to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (heart attack and stroke) and breast cancer.
- **Eat a healthy balanced diet** to avoid putting on weight. Vitamin D and calcium in your diet will keep your bones healthy.
- **Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake** as they can trigger hot flushes.
- **Give up smoking:** doing this will reduce hot flushes and your risks of developing heart disease, stroke and cancer (including breast cancer).
- **Reducing stress levels** improves mood swings. Alternative therapies such as yoga / pilates may help.
- **Vaginal symptoms** such as dryness, irritation or painful sex can be helped by vaginal lubricants or moisturisers such as YES, Sylk or Replens®.

Non-prescribed treatments

- **Alternative medicine:** A range of therapies can be used instead of conventional medicine, such as acupuncture, acupressure and homeopathy.

- **Complementary therapy:** These are interventions which can be used alongside conventional medicine eg aromatherapy with HRT.
- **Herbal medicines:** Supplements such as St John's Wort, black cohosh and high dose red clover tablets can be used to treat hot flushes and night sweats. You should use any herbal medications with caution if you are taking other prescribed medications as reactions can occur. Women taking tamoxifen must not take St John's Wort as it makes the tamoxifen ineffective. If you are going to try a new treatment then it is suggested that you try one at a time for at least 3 months to see if it works.

Prescribed treatments

- **Non-hormonal medical treatments:** These are treatments which can be prescribed by your doctor, such as clonidine, gabapentin or venlafaxine. They can help to reduce hot flushes and night sweats.

Psychological treatments

- **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT):** Develops practical ways of managing problems and provides new coping skills and useful strategies for a range of menopausal symptoms including anxiety, hot flushes, night sweats and fatigue.

Useful resources:

NHS website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/hormone-replacement-therapy-hrt

British Menopause Society: www.thebms.org.uk

Royal Osteoporosis Society: www.theros.org.uk

The Daisy Network-provides support and information for women who have experienced a premature menopause.

Website: www.daisynetwork.org.uk

RCOG Menopause information: www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients/menopause

Menopause Matters: www.menopausematters.co.uk

Women's Health Concern: www.womens-health-concern.org

The One-Stop Guide Menopause: A practical guide to understanding and dealing with the menopause by Kathy Abernethy

Apps: Balance, Health and Her Menopause

Instagram: #rockmymenopause, fluxstate_menopause

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