

## A Menopause Primer

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“The change of life”: Great name because it presents so many life-changing challenges. For generations, this is what menopause has been called, shared between women, and from mother to daughter. Just like puberty, menopause is a natural change for which every woman’s body is programmed. And just like puberty, it means many changes — and challenges.

The word “menopause” actually means “last period,” a fitting term formally applied when a full year has passed after a woman’s last period. For most women, natural menopause occurs between the ages of 40 and 58 years, the average being about age 51. There are cases at the extreme of women reaching menopause in their 30s, and in their 60s.

Not all women experience natural menopause. “Induced menopause” is brought on by surgical removal of ovaries or ovarian damage from medical interventions such as chemotherapy or pelvic radiation. In a hysterectomy where the ovaries are left in place, menopause is not induced since hormone production continues. It may, however, speed up the onset by a year or two.

Menopause is a normal part of the aging process, marking the end of menstrual periods, and of fertility. It is a process that usually begins two to five years before a woman’s last period. The body slows down its production of hormones, particularly estrogen and progesterone. The dropping levels of hormones, especially estrogen, leads to many of the changes that occur.

The effects of menopause and the changes to a woman’s body can be significant, though each case is different. Her periods can become irregular and may be heavier, or lighter, than normal. Hot flashes are common for about three-quarters of women. Since estrogen affects blood flow therefore helps regulate body temperature, as its levels drop, irregular cooling can result, causing hot flashes. Mood swings, insomnia, fatigue, and reduced sexual desire and response are all symptoms of menopause, though again, each woman will have her own unique combination.

Managing the symptoms of menopause is one of the challenges for women. Of course, treatment may not be required if symptoms are not severe. But if they are, effective treatments are available. One common treatment is “hormone replacement therapy,” though replacement is a misnomer since only a small proportion of the hormones are re-introduced.

HRT can be a big question for women. On the one hand, there is clear scientific evidence that it provides substantial relief from symptoms such as hot flashes, irritability, dry skin and lack of concentration. It also helps prevent bone loss and promotes bone reconstruction. On the other hand, there is controversy over the possibility of a link between HRT and heart disease. A study was called off in 2002 after researchers found a slightly increased risk of heart attack, stroke and breast cancer among women using HRT for more than five years. It is critical to note, however, that on an individual level, this increase amounted to less than a tenth of one percent per year of use of HRT, and none at all before five years. Still, caution may be warranted.

Hormone replacement is not the only solution for menopausal women. Other strategies include making lifestyle changes: reduced use of substances like tobacco and alcohol, adequate exercise, a healthy diet, and weight management. Non-prescription remedies include vitamin and mineral supplements — but the choice should be made only after consulting with a doctor.

For some women, complementary and alternative medicine therapies (CAM) may offer an option. CAM options include herbs, foods, botanicals and supplements, sometimes in concert with naturopathy, homeopathy and acupuncture. Since many of these CAMs are untested, can be expensive, and may well take weeks to work, it is wise to be cautious and to consult with a physician first. Also, many alternative medicines are advertised as “natural” to suggest they are somehow better for you, but quality control, dosage and purity are often not regulated so the claims may be worthless.

Whatever a woman’s chosen method for dealing with her symptoms, treatment should last only as long as it is truly needed. And that period will vary for every woman depending on her health profile and lifestyle.

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686 WORDS