

A woman is shown from the chest down, wearing a red long-sleeved top and a dark, textured skirt. She is standing with her left hand near her skirt. The background is white.

# Menopause

**Menopause** is the time when monthly periods end. It is a normal process in a woman's life and usually happens between the ages of 45 and 55. The decrease in hormones means the lining of the womb does not thicken and need to be shed, so there is no blood, or period.

## Physical changes that happen in menopause

- Periods often become irregular and then stop.
- Ovaries get smaller and produce fewer eggs.
- Less of the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone are produced.

## Menopause – things you may experience

### Changes in your bleeding patterns

You may have a longer time between periods, missing periods, heavy periods, periods closer together, a gradual decrease in bleeding, or your periods may just stop.

See your doctor if you have bleeding between periods, heavy or extended bleeding, or start bleeding again a year or more after your periods stopped.

### Increased premenstrual syndrome

You may experience more discomfort before your period than usual.

A woman is shown from the waist up, wearing a red long-sleeved sweater and a dark patterned skirt. She is wearing a brown leather watch on her left wrist. The background is a solid light blue color.

# Menopause

## Hot flushes and sweats

You may feel a sudden wave of heat spreading through your face and neck and sometimes the rest of your body. Your face may go slightly red and sweaty. Although you may be very aware of these changes they are not always obvious to other people.

You may wake in the night covered in sweat.

## Dry vagina

With less oestrogen, the walls of the vagina become thinner and this can cause dryness. A dry vagina may make intercourse uncomfortable. A water-based lubricant can help, or your doctor may prescribe an oestrogen cream. Infections such as thrush (candida) are more likely after menopause. You may also find you need to pass urine more frequently.

## Urinary incontinence

Increasing age and lowered oestrogen cause changes in the tissues supporting the bladder, which may lead to problems with leakage of urine when the bladder is full or when stressed during coughing, sneezing or exercise. Bladder training exercises (such as Kegels) may help. Some women require surgery or insertion of a pessary by their doctor.

## Palpitations

A fluttering sensation in your chest that may last for a few seconds or minutes is called a palpitation. It may be related to menopause but can have other causes like anxiety or caffeine. If palpitations are happening often, see your doctor.

## Other symptoms

At menopause you may notice you are more likely to be tired, anxious, forgetful, depressed, irritable and sleep poorly. You may feel a loss of concentration, loss of confidence and mood changes.

## Menopause and hysterectomy

Women who have had a hysterectomy may still feel symptoms. Even when ovaries have been removed you may still have symptoms.

## Self care

Understanding what is happening and a positive approach will help during this stage of your life. Looking after yourself is always important.

- Make sure you eat healthy food with plenty of vegetables and fruit.
- Reduce fat, sugar and salt.

Bone strength improves with plenty of calcium, found in milk, cheese and yoghurt. Calcium supplements are available if you are not getting the recommended 1000mgs per day (ages 31–50 years) or 1300mgs per day (51–70 years) in your diet.

- Exercise regularly for half an hour three times a week. Walking, swimming, dancing, tennis, aerobics, etc, help general fitness and make you feel good.
- Think positively, knowing that you are not losing your femininity or ability to respond sexually. Some women enjoy sex more when they don't have the worry of becoming pregnant.
- Use relaxation techniques, yoga and meditation to help deal with stress.
- Reduce the use of tobacco, alcohol and caffeine.
- Sleep in a cool room, and try wearing natural fabrics and layered clothing.

## After menopause

Lack of oestrogen after menopause can increase the likelihood of:

- *Osteoporosis* – calcium loss and the gradual thinning and weakening of bones with age. Prevention begins well before menopause by regular intake of calcium in food, especially dairy products. Calcium supplements are also available in tablet form.
- *Heart disease or stroke* through build up of fat in the arteries. The risk after menopause becomes as great for women as for men.

## Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

Although combined hormone replacement therapy (oestrogen and progestogen) is available on prescription from your doctor, it is no longer recommended for long-term use.

Studies published in July 2002 found that long term HRT was associated with increased risk from breast cancer, blood clots, heart disease and stroke. These increased risks mean that HRT is no longer recommended as first line treatment for the prevention of osteoporosis and fractures.

Combined HRT is effective in control of the menopausal symptoms of hot flushes and night sweats. However even short-term use of HRT is associated with increased risk of venous thromboembolism, stroke and coronary disease. Therefore HRT should only be used where menopausal symptoms are troublesome and women are fully informed of the risks.

Any women who remain on HRT should discuss their risks with their doctor.

## Getting help

You may want to discuss menopause with a doctor, especially if the symptoms are interfering with your daily life.

Some branches of the New Zealand Family Planning Association hold regular sessions about menopause. You could contact your nearest branch listed under Family Planning in the phone book.

## Books about menopause

Your local library or bookshop will have books on menopause.

Some suggested titles are:

- *Menopause* by Dr Beverly Lawton (Random House 2006), ISBN 978 1 86941 7147
- *Your Change Your Choice* by Michael Dooley and Sarah Stacey (Hodder and Stoughton 2004), ISBN 0 34082885 4

New Zealand Government



This resource is available from [www.healthed.govt.nz](http://www.healthed.govt.nz) or the Authorised Provider at your local DHB. New Zealand. Revised February 2010. 06/2012.

**Code HE4141**