

## Breeze Through Menopause

*Menopause is a natural process in every woman's life, and it shouldn't be a time of stress, depression, and weight gain. It should be a gentle transition from one beautiful phase of life to another...*

### **What is Menopause?**

Menopause is the point at which a woman stops ovulating and menstruation stops, indicating the end of fertility. With the end of ovulation, the ovaries more or less stop producing the hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which are needed for many other bodily functions. Other oestrogen sources thereafter come mainly from the adrenal glands and fat cells.

### **When does it happen?**

The menopausal period is different for each individual woman. The average age at menopause is about fifty. The transition usually lasts up to five years. Timing of menopause is also linked to several factors, including age at first period (the earlier you start, the later you stop), smoking, poor nutrition, hysterectomy, PMS (delayed if suffer PMS), and being childless (earlier menopause).

3 phases of menopause:

- Pre-menopause - in this phase, periods are still regular, and first symptoms appear, e.g. hot flashes, night sweats, possible mood changes
- Peri-menopause – in this phase, ovary function declines, periods can become irregular, symptoms may be more severe
- Post-menopause – this phase starts from the last period onwards

### **What are the symptoms?**

Some women go through menopause with few or no noticeable symptoms. Many women, however, experience a range of symptoms from hot flashes to heart palpitations and insomnia. Over time, the diminished supply of oestrogen increases the likelihood of cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and vaginal atrophy.

Also, how a woman views this time of her life can have a lot to do with how frequent and severe her symptoms are. With proper diet, nutritional supplements, and exercise, most of the unpleasant side effects can be minimised, if not eliminated.

To find out if you are menopausal, take the 'Am I menopause' quiz in this article.

### **HRT – yes or no?**

HRT refers to 'hormone replacement therapy' used widely for addressing menopause. HRT treatment includes oestrogen and progesterone and is presented in various types including oral, patch and implant. The goal of HRT is to restore a woman's hormonal balance, primarily oestrogen levels. A menopausal woman needs to carefully consider the risks and benefits of HRT treatment for her situation now and over a long duration of use.

HRT relieves pre- and post-menopausal symptoms, as well as being an effective preventive measure against some of the longer-term effects of oestrogen deficiency, namely osteoporosis and heart disease (debateable and more research is needed). However, HRT's side effects can include weight gain, breast tenderness, bloating, depression, raised blood pressure, skin rashes, hair loss, vaginal thrush, and risk of several forms of cancer (e.g. breast and ovarian cancers). So it is important to always ask questions, research the latest information, and discuss your options thoroughly with your health care provider.

### **How can Nutrition help?**

It is very important to realise that menopause symptoms are not a 'necessary evil'. Symptoms can often be eased with simple nutritional and lifestyle steps. For that you must try to:

- ◆ Reduce **salt** intake. Salt increases the body's excretion of calcium, which is needed for healthy bones. And avoid **spicy foods** as they can trigger hot flashes and mood swings

- ◆ Support the **adrenal glands** with adequate levels of vitamin C and B5. Vitamin C is found mainly in fresh fruits and vegetables; B vitamins are found in wholegrains and leafy green vegetables.
- ◆ And most importantly, balance your **hormones** and improve **liver** function. See ‘How can I balance my hormones’ section.

#### *How can I balance my hormones?*

- Eat a lot of **fruits and vegetables** – especially cruciferous vegetables to aid liver function.
- Eat **complex carbohydrates** and avoid refined/processed foods – to keep blood sugar balanced
- Increase foods rich in **phytoestrogens** such as beans, lentils, chickpeas, soy products, flaxseeds, dates – these foods are called ‘adaptogens’ meaning that they will adapt to the body’s needs, and will increase or decrease oestrogen levels as needed
- Buy **organic** food as much as possible to avoid antibiotics, pesticides and xeno-oestrogens. If that’s not possible, then wash all fruits and vegetables very well in a dilute vinegar solution
- Include **essential fats** from raw nuts and seeds or Udo’s Oil
- Increase **water** intake – helps transport waste out of the body
- Increase **fibre** – helps reduce constipation and excrete toxins and oestrogens. Fibre is found in, beans, pulses, fruits, vegetables, and wholegrains such as brown rice
- Reduce **saturated fats** – it contains arachidonic acid and causes inflammation
- Avoid **dairy products and red meat** (except low-fat live yoghurt in small amounts). Dairy products and red meat contribute to hormone imbalances and can promote hot flashes; they also contribute to loss of calcium from the bones
- Avoid **sugars and refined foods** (e.g. chocolates, desserts, white rice, white bread, etc.) in order to keep blood sugar balanced
- Avoid or reduce **caffeine** (coffee, tea, fizzy drinks) as it contributes to hormonal imbalance and increases chances of hormone-related disorders.
- Avoid **alcohol** – to keep the liver healthy
- Avoid food **additives and preservatives** – these tax the immune system and burden the liver, which have to be strong to clear out hormones and prevent hormonal conditions

#### *What about lifestyle?*

- ◆ Reduce or quit **Smoking** as it is associated with early menopause
- ◆ Take adequate **exercise** to strengthen bones and prevent osteoporosis, because levels of oestrogen, which protect bones, decline with menopause. 30 minutes, 4 times a week is all you need!
- ◆ Avoid **stress** as much as possible and try stress management techniques such as massage, hot baths, music, meditation, prayer, etc. Stress puts a burden on the adrenal glands causing them to work harder than they should. As a result, the adrenals produce less of the hormones needed to counteract the effects of declining oestrogen.

#### *Which Supplements help?*

- ◆ A quality multi-vitamin/mineral is necessary as all nutrients are needed for normal hormone production and function
- ◆ Vitamins C and E – for skin and membrane elasticity, and for reducing hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Eat more fruits and vegetables such as kiwis and avocados.
- ◆ B vitamins and Magnesium are anti-stress nutrients that act as relaxants and can help with anxiety, irritability, and mood swings often experienced during menopause. Eat more wholegrains, broccoli, cauliflower, almonds, and lots of green leafy vegetables.

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- ◆ EFAs (essential fats) such as fish oils, evening primrose oil and/or Udo's oil are necessary for weight loss, healthy skin and hair, and for combating general dryness.

### ***Am I menopauseing?***

- Have your periods been irregular?
- Do you have hot flashes (a sensation of heat spreading from waist or chest toward the neck, face and upper arms)?
- Do you experience night sweats?
- Do you suffer from mood swings?
- Do you find yourself anxious and irritable?
- Are you depressed?
- Are you often tired and fatigued for no apparent reason?
- Do you get headaches and spells of dizziness?
- Are you gaining weight for no apparent reason?
- Do you have bloating, especially in the upper abdomen?
- Do you experience vaginal dryness and itching?
- Do you experience burning and discomfort during sexual intercourse?
- Do you have poor libido and diminished interest in sex?
- Do you have bladder problems and frequent urinary tract infections?
- Do you have breast tenderness?
- Is your skin more dry than usual, and showing more signs of ageing such as wrinkles?
- Do you get easily out of breath and experience heart palpitations?
- Do you suffer from insomnia and sleep difficulties?

Some or all of these symptoms are related to oestrogen and progesterone deficiencies that often accompany menopause. During this period, the body tends to accumulate fat in order to maintain oestrogen production, so weight gain is common. Diet and lifestyle changes are usually very effective in easing menopause symptoms and achieving general health and wellbeing. If you have any concerns about menopause, always discuss them with your healthcare provider, and never stop any medication without consulting your doctor.

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