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Menopause

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The point in a woman's life when she stops experiencing monthly menses (periods) for an entire year is defined as menopause. It marks the final chapter in a woman's reproductive cycle and an end to her fertility. Menopause occurs as the woman's ovaries slow in their production of estrogen and eventually stop releasing eggs. In most women, this is a gradual process that develops over several years. The average age for achieving menopause is 51 years.

The time during which a woman begins to experience the transition into menopause is called perimenopause. For most women, perimenopausal symptoms start around age 45. This period of fluctuating hormones may have implications for the woman physically and emotionally. Some women look forward to this time when they can look back at monthly bleeding and concerns over pregnancy with newfound freedom. Others express anxiety and discomfort as the changes of perimenopause impact their feelings of youthfulness and overall health.

The cessation of menstruation caused by the surgical removal of the ovaries and uterus or chemotherapy or radiation treatments is known as induced menopause. This experience differs from natural menopause in that it is an abrupt rather than gradual change.

A woman who has achieved menopause is considered postmenopausal. It is essential that she continue to monitor her health through yearly breast and pelvic examinations, Papanicolaou (Pap) smears, and general health screenings, such as bone density tests and colonoscopy.

A changing menstrual pattern is often the first indication a woman may have that she is perimenopausal. The cycle typically becomes irregular with skipped or missed periods, but may also manifest more frequent, heavier bleeding. It is important to provide contraceptive counseling to perimenopausal women, because until menopause is achieved, fertility and pregnancy are a possibility. Hormonal contraception during this period may also help offset some of the physical discomforts that are frequently experienced during this phase.

In addition to changing bleeding patterns, the majority of perimenopausal women experience some combination of the following symptoms: hot flashes, increased sweating, frequent urination, headaches, vaginal dryness, decreased libido, insomnia, forgetfulness, and mood swings. Perimenopausal women are often also dealing with midlife events that can exacerbate these symptoms.

Hormonal and nonhormonal treatments are available for reducing the symptoms of menopause. Nonhormonal options are varied and may be specific to certain categories of symptoms. For example, although a diet that is rich in vegetables and fruit and minimizes saturated fats is best for overall health, avoiding caffeine and alcoholic beverages and increasing soy foods may actually decrease the number and severity of hot flashes and night sweats. Weight-bearing and aerobic exercise is recommended to help maintain bone density and cardiac function. Kegel exercises, the tightening and relaxing of the vaginal muscles, increases blood flow, increases lubrication, helps maintain bladder control, and may enhance orgasm.

Menopausal women have employed alternative medicine options such as homeopathy and acupuncture, as well as use of herbal supplements, for successful relief of

bothersome symptoms.

Hormonal treatments have been a popular choice but do have some associated risks. These options must be tailored to each woman's needs keeping under consideration her relevant health history to maintain risks at a minimum.

Vaginal creams are used by many women to reduce vaginal dryness and enhance sexual function. Nonprescription lubricants and vaginal moisturizers are also available.

Systemic hormonal therapy benefits women by eliminating hot flashes, reducing vaginal dryness caused by thinning vaginal tissue, decreasing insomnia, and possibly improving mood and energy levels. However, these therapies may carry added risks for some women that may outweigh the benefits. These may include an increased risk for breast and uterine cancer, heart disease, blood clots, and gallbladder disease.

In general, the perimenopausal period of a woman's life brings with it many changes—some welcomed, some not. However, the achievement of menopause, a milestone in female development, may be associated with feelings of freedom, relaxation, and overall well-being.

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See also

- [Hormone Replacement Therapy](#)
- [Hot Flashes](#)
- [Ovulation](#)

Further Readings and References

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