WOMEN'S HEALTH

Menopause symptoms

and what to do about them

What is it?

The **menopause** is when periods stop for good because the ovaries make much less of the hormone oestrogen. It is confirmed after **12 months without a period**, usually between 45 and 55 (the UK average is 51). The **perimenopause** is the time before this, often several years, when hormone levels rise and fall and symptoms usually begin. Up to 9 in 10 women get symptoms, and you do not have to put up with them.

What you might notice

- Periods changing: closer together, further apart, heavier or lighter
- Night sweats that soak your nightclothes and wake you up
- Low mood, anxiety, irritability or not feeling like yourself
- Vaginal dryness, itching or soreness, and pain during sex
- Aching joints and muscles, headaches or a pounding heartbeat
- Hot flushes: sudden waves of heat in your face, neck and chest
- Poor sleep, waking early and feeling tired during the day
- Brain fog: forgetting words, losing focus, struggling to multitask
- Needing to pass urine more often, or repeated urine infections
- Less interest in sex, and changes to your skin, hair or weight

Types of menopause

Natural menopause

The most common type. It happens gradually, usually between the ages of 45 and 55.

Early menopause

Between 40 and 45. It can run in families or happen for no clear reason.

Before the age of 40

Called premature ovarian insufficiency. Please always see a GP about it.

After surgery or treatment

Removing both ovaries, chemotherapy or radiotherapy can bring it on suddenly.

Who may start earlier or have stronger symptoms

Smoking | **Family history of early menopause** | **Surgery to the ovaries or womb** | **Chemotherapy or radiotherapy** | **Black ethnicity (stronger flushes)** | **Past PMS or postnatal depression**

Please turn over for what you can do and when to get help →

How you can help yourself

Keep a diary
Note your periods, flushes, sleep and mood for a few weeks and bring it with you.

Stay cool
Wear layers, use a fan. Cut down caffeine, alcohol, spicy food and smoking.

Keep moving
Brisk walking and strength exercise protect your bones and heart and lift mood.

Eat for your bones
Get enough calcium, and take vitamin D 10 micrograms a day in autumn and winter.

Protect your sleep
Keep a regular bedtime and a cool bedroom. Wind down away from screens.

Talk about it
Tell family, friends or your employer. Small changes at work can help a lot.

Herbal remedies such as black cohosh, St John's wort and isoflavones are unregulated and can interact with medicines. Please ask us first.

What the doctor will do

1. **Listen and assess.** We ask about your symptoms, periods, health, medicines and family history. If you are over 45 with typical symptoms, a blood test is usually not needed.
2. **Rule out other causes.** We check your blood pressure and weight and, if needed, test for thyroid problems, anaemia or pregnancy.
3. **Talk through treatment.** HRT is the most effective treatment for flushes and sweats. Patches, gel or spray do not raise the risk of clots. Non-hormone medicines and menopause CBT also help.
4. **Review and follow up.** Vaginal oestrogen, moisturisers and lubricants ease dryness. We review any treatment after 3 months, then at least once a year.

Tell us if you need contraception. You can still get pregnant until 2 years after your last period if you are under 50, or 1 year if you are over 50. HRT is not a contraceptive.

Call 999 if you have
- Chest pain or sudden breathlessness
- Sudden weakness of face, arm or leg
- Thoughts of suicide and you feel unsafe

Contact us the same day if
- Bleeding after 12 months with no period
- New bleeding on HRT after 6 months
- A painful swollen calf or breast lump

Looking ahead

Flushes and sweats usually fade over several years, but vaginal and bladder symptoms tend to stay without treatment. With the right support most women feel much better. Staying active and not smoking protect your bones and heart for the years ahead.

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