



AGES & STAGES OF MENOPAUSE (WHAT TO EXPECT)

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YOU WANT AND NEED TO KNOW which symptoms to expect from your menopause, and when to expect them. Given that all women are different, this is a simple guide.

Premenopause is basically the years from puberty to menopause, age 13 to 51 on average, or all of your fertile years Perimenopause begins when your ovaries start to run out of eggs, and your fertility hormones slow down production; usually in mid 40s Menopause is diagnosed when you haven't had a period for 12 months; the average age when this is diagnosed in UK is 51 Post menopause is the rest of your beautiful life, no longer hostage to hormone fluctuations, As I've said several times already, be prepared to notice the first symptoms of perimenopause during early to mid-forties. For some women these symptoms are mild and for others some of them are noticeable but manageable. For other women some are life limiting and will lead to decisions such as giving up their working life or their romantic partner. If you prepare well now, you give yourself the best chance of gliding gracefully through a gentle menopause.

Age 45 and over you don't need a blood test to confirm perimenopause, age and symptoms are enough to be offered hormonal support. Younger than 45 with irregular periods and peri symptoms may need investigation for potential POI (premature ovarian insufficiency) go and talk to your doctor. There are some remedies I've heard about which seem to offer more support to more women than others. Suggestions are - drinking half a pint of soy milk daily, taking a quality calcium supplement, and daily magnesium supplement. Be careful however, because you don't need to supplement calcium if you have dairy in your diet.

If you enjoy alcohol, I know how easy it is to open a bottle of wine when the day's been tough, I did it, all my colleagues did too. Around menopause time, you don't need those empty calories, alcohol disrupts sleep and it can trigger hot flushes and night sweats.

Your life might be full and busy, but fitting in exercise is as important as a good eating pattern. Health is wealth, not a large bank account. At this middle stage of life, you are setting yourself up for the next 50 years, so make them lean, fit and contented, then you'll have choices instead of crutches.

In your mid 40s, earliest symptoms you should expect are: -

- Irregular periods, sometimes very heavy, sometimes non-existent
- Hot flushes during the day and night sweats
- Emotional upheaval; tearful, angry, sad, overwhelmed, hopelessness

In your later 40s: -

- All of the above, plus
- Loss of personal confidence and drive to get things done
- Loss of immediate recall of names and facts
- Anxiety over the smallest of tasks and decisions
- Lack of focus and concentration
- Joint pain, especially spine, hip, knees
- Worsening sleep disturbances
- Hair thinning
- Weight gain around the midriff

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50's freedom, finally, free of sanitary supplies, maybe.

Twelve months without a period means you are now past perimenopause, have gone through menopause and are now post menopausal. Great, is that it then? No, sorry you're just getting warmed up.

Lots of women I know experienced only mild symptoms in their peri menopause; but just when they thought it had all passed them by, they had a jolt when symptoms became a problem. Don't be complacent, and ignore problems; especially bladder, emotional and sexual.

I know many women in their forties who have young children and elderly parents, who work full time themselves. It's a great deal to manage, as well as their own household. How will life change as your perimenopause begins?

Early post-menopause: -

- All of the above experienced in your 40's, plus
- Brain fog, poor decision making, memory loss – this all continues
- Personal confidence can take a nose dive
- Skin becomes drier and needs more moisturising
- Hair becomes drier and of course your colour needs attention more often (if you colour it)
- Urinary incontinence could become a problem, a little leakage at first, getting worse in time
- Urinary infections can be a recurrent problem
- Dry and sore vagina, no matter how much stimulation, it just isn't moist and welcoming
- Occasionally vague 'fishy' odour from a discoloured vaginal discharge
- Vaginal prolapse is common, (urge to pee more often and wanting to 'bear down' are signs of this)
- Bloating and weight gain, your midriff may join forces with belly
- Overflowing bra cups
- Facial wrinkles deepen and complexion changes, developing dark freckles anywhere
- Eyebrows go rogue and whiskers appear randomly around chin and mouth
- Vision gets poorer and most women need magnifying spectacles at least
- You could possibly be troubled by heart palpitations and pains in your chest
- Pains in chest that feel like a heart attack but are often dreadful indigestion
- Back pain is a common complaint and potential bone fractures from late 50s

All of the above are common symptoms in females who don't supplement their oestrogen. Those who do find a supplement which works for them will usually experience fewer and milder symptoms.

Moisturise your vagina the way you moisturise your face, every day 60s sashay into the sunset - the really great news is that almost all of the earlier symptoms disappear as your body has become re-balanced and is getting on without fertility hormones. However, the long-term effects of loss of oestrogen can create problems: -

- Hot flushes and night sweats reduce and by mid 60s are infrequent if felt at all
- Vaginal imbalance should be resolved but vaginal dryness and thinning of skin might be worse
- If urinary problems have developed, they will be worse, so do your exercises (see chapter on bladder) and discuss a topical vaginal oestrogen supplement
- Your bones lose density rapidly and bone fractures, especially wrist, are common

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- Wrinkles and frown lines deepen and join up
- Whiskers appearance needs constant vigilance
- There may be a need to re-adjust your mindset, having become used to the 'brain fog' of midlife, it's too easy to assume that is normal – it's not
- Heart disease is life limiting in the extreme, so prevention takes the form of good diet and regular exercise.

Long term health issues - once your body stops producing oestrogen, you are at greater risk of developing osteoporosis, Alzheimer's and heart disease. In fact, 1 in 2 deaths in post-menopausal women in America is from heart disease.

Compare that with 1 in 29 deaths in post-menopausal women being from breast cancer. Women focus on the thought that oestrogen causes breast cancer, and completely ignore how much protection oestrogen will give their heart.

So, what can you do to support your body and protect it from these later life stage diseases? Of course, the answer is similar to the one asked about menopause symptoms; everyone's menopause is different and every single body reacts differently to nutrition, exercise and medication. here are some ideas: -

- Entering your mid-forties with good nutrition and a light body weight is optimum for having the easiest, least disruptive menopause.
- Exercise of some kind every day is good for your mental and physical health and also helps to prevent joint and muscle pains. You'll find sleep is better after exercise too. Get family involved and exercise is even better
- Exercise which causes the long bones in your legs to have impact (think jogging, bouncing, dancing, walking moderately fast) is very helpful to maintain excellent bone health everywhere in your body
- Whatever you eat in whatever portions, (I include health supplements of all kinds) can never equal what your body used to produce, nor give you the same amount of oestrogen and progesterone as can hormone supplement therapy
- Many women who have been thin all of their lives due to diet, develop symptoms of osteoporosis in their 60's. You need to have calcium in your diet daily as well as vit D3, so get a proper supplement or learn how to get it from nutrition and don't ignore the importance of it. Osteoporosis is dreadful and avoidable in the 21st century.
- Be realistic about the weight you expect to lose while going through your menopause. Limit the damage caused by over eating and drinking wine daily by having smaller portions and choosing something non-alcoholic before dinner.

If you understand the risks and are prepared to do the work required, by the time you are late 50's and in your 60's you will emerge as a fit and strong woman with at least another thirty years of healthy and joyful life ahead.

Now you can draw breath and re-evaluate your life in light of your post-menopausal state. In the UK there has been an enormous shift in the number of people discussing menopause over the last year, remedies and symptoms are all over TV and media; this is fabulous and has opened up a wider conversation about older women in the workplace. In the UK we now have to wait until age 65 to claim our Government Pension and many women have to work until then.

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If you have to earn income until 65 it's even more important to look after yourself and stay strong, fit and healthy. That habit begins in your younger years as you prepare for menopause, and as long as you can walk, you can take exercise.

Continue to moisturise your vagina in the same way you do your face and neck with paraben free and safe products such as 'Sylk', 'Yes Yes' etc. You can thank me later.

Or, if you already suffer bladder infections, vaginal discharge, or painful intercourse, go and ask your doctor for 'Vagifem' or similar, which is a vaginal preparation containing low-dose oestrogen and is designed to re-build the thinning skin and stop those problems recurring.

And, sail away