

## **The Menopause - Short Term & Long Term Effects Information Leaflet**

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### **The Menopause**

The menopause is the stage in a woman's life when her ovaries stop producing eggs. This leads to a gradual decrease in levels of hormones oestrogen and progesterone, which in turn leads to the gradual disappearance of monthly periods. The fall in hormone levels can trigger a range of symptoms, although each woman's experience can be different. The process of the menopause can take several years. A woman is said to be postmenopausal when she has had no period for one year.

The average age at which women in the UK start the menopause is 51, and for most women it happens between the ages of 45 and 55.

To prevent pregnancy, it is recommended that contraception is continued for one year after the last period if this occurs after 50 years of age, and two years if periods end before 50 years of age.

### **Premature Menopause**

Although most women will reach their menopause in their late forties or early fifties, for a minority of women it can happen earlier. Premature menopause occurs before the age of 40. Some women experience menopause in their thirties or even their twenties, although this is uncommon.

### **Surgically Induced Menopause**

A woman becomes menopausal if she has a hysterectomy and at the same time both her ovaries are removed.

When this happens, the natural process of gradual decline in hormone levels does not happen. Instead, the absence of the ovaries means that hormone levels fall at once and the woman can experience symptoms of menopause more suddenly than if she were to have a natural menopause.

Occasionally, the blood supply to the ovaries can be interrupted during an operation; and this can lead to menopause occurring soon after surgery – even if the ovaries have not been removed.

### **How the Menopause Might Affect You**

Menopause is a natural event that all women will experience. Many women have no problems. Below are the most common menopausal signs and symptoms. They are caused by falling oestrogen levels:

#### **Menopause - Short-Term Effects**

##### **Irregular Periods**

The most common early sign is irregular or fluctuating periods. This can involve longer than normal cycles and missed periods.

##### **Hot Flashes/Night Sweats**

Three out of four women have hot flashes and night sweats during their menopause. They usually start as a feeling of pressure in the head, followed by a wave of heat passing over the body.

## **Vaginal Dryness**

Most women experience vaginal dryness during the menopause. This is because the vaginal tissue becomes thinner as a result of lower oestrogen levels. (See Atrophic Vaginitis leaflet).

## **Aches and Pains**

Joints may start to feel stiffer, painful or weak.

## **Skin and Hair Changes**

Skin can become dryer and hair brittle.

## **Sleep Disturbance**

Altered sleep patterns can be a problem.

## **Mood, Confidence and Concentration Changes**

Lack of concentration and clear thinking can affect some women. Psychological changes, including irritability, tearfulness and mild depression are also common. It is understandable to feel a wide range of emotions during this time of major change.

## **Loss of Sex Drive**

A loss of interest in sex can be caused by some of the emotional and physical symptoms of the menopause.

## **Stress Incontinence**

Lack of oestrogen causes the lining of the bladder to become thinner, which may make it harder to control the passing of urine. Passing urine more often or noticing small 'leaks' when coughing or sneezing are also common. Urine infections can also occur.

## **Menopause – Long-Term Effects**

Even though the short-term symptoms appear more unpleasant, it is the long-term symptoms of oestrogen deficiency that can cause the more serious health problems.

When a woman reaches the menopause, her risk of developing Heart Disease and Osteoporosis increases as a direct result of the decrease in oestrogen:

### **Heart Disease**

Cardiovascular disease is the most common cause of death in western women. Before the menopause, fewer women suffer from the condition than men, but, from the menopause onwards, incidence increases. The role of oestrogen in protecting the heart and blood vessels is very important; the body's own oestrogen prior to the menopause is understood to have a positive effect on cholesterol levels and general body fat distribution.

### **Osteoporosis**

Osteoporosis is a condition of the bones, where a gradual thinning of the bone causes them to become brittle and fragile, leading to a stooping posture, backache and an increased risk of fractures. Lack of oestrogen is partly responsible for Osteoporosis.

## Managing Symptoms of the Menopause

There are many approaches to managing menopause symptoms – see accompanying leaflets on HRT and alternative approaches to symptom management:

- Avoid caffeine and reduce alcohol to improve sleeping and flushes.
- Wear loose layers of clothing and consider swapping duvet for blankets to help cope with flushes, sweats and chills.
- Cut down or ideally stop smoking.
- Eat a balanced diet, rich in Calcium, Magnesium and Vitamin D to protect bones, and Omega 3 for heart health.
- Keeping weight in health BMI range will reduce menopause flushes and protect against many cancers - in particular breast cancer.
- Regular exercise will improve mood. Weight bearing exercise helps keep bones strong.
- Relaxation/mindfulness/meditation will reduce menopause symptoms and improve general wellbeing.
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can relieve low mood, anxiety and flushes.

## References:

British Menopause Society  
Clinical Knowledge Summaries  
Menopause Matters  
National Institute for Health and Care  
Excellence (NICE) 2015  
Menopause: Diagnosis and  
Management  
Royal College of Obstetricians and  
Gynaecologists (RCOG) Menopause  
Patient Information Hub

([www.thebms.org.uk](http://www.thebms.org.uk))  
[www.cks/patient information](http://www.cks/patient information)  
[www.menopausematters.co.uk](http://www.menopausematters.co.uk)

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23)

[www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients](http://www.rcog.org.uk/en/patients)

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