44+

FOR WOMEN APPROACHING MENOPAUSE

WHAT IS MENOPAUSE (CHANGE OF LIFE)?
These days women live longer, and should have much to look forward to in their middle and later years – new interests, new work, new relationships and friendships, perhaps travel, all built on a foundation of good health and feeling well.

The most important thing about menopause is that it's a natural process, and nothing to fear. Many women will have no symptoms when they go through the change of life, and those who do need support will find it easy to obtain.

◆ What Is Menopause (Change of Life)?

A natural event in a woman's life when her periods stop. Most women don't have severe symptoms caused by this change. But if you do, don't worry - there are ways to make you feel better.

• When Does It Happen?

Usually between the ages of 44 and 55 - sometimes it happens earlier or later than this.
• **How Does It Happen?**

Your periods may stop quite suddenly, but most women find it takes months or years before they stop. Periods may get lighter and more irregular before finally stopping. If they are heavier, or if you get bleeding in between periods, see your doctor.

• **Why Does Menopause Happen?**

On either side of a woman’s womb (uterus) are the ovaries. The ovaries make substances called hormones. These hormones help women produce an egg each month. During menopause the ovaries begin making less of these hormones. Eventually no more eggs are produced and the periods stop.
Menopause can happen at any age if a woman's ovaries are taken out when she has a hysterectomy (removal of the womb). However, ovaries are not always removed at the time of hysterectomy and should only be removed for a very good reason.

- **Will Menopause Affect You?**

Most women will have either no symptoms at all or only mild symptoms lasting only for a few months. But for some women, symptoms (e.g. hot flushes, vaginal and urinary problems, and mood changes) may be distressing. For some women these symptoms may continue for a few years, but they can be treated.
• Who Can Help?

A doctor, women's health centre, Family Planning clinic or menopause clinic can all give you good advice on coping with symptoms. (See the section Where to Go for More Information and Help at the end of this pamphlet.) But even if you don't have symptoms, it's a good idea to see your doctor or women's health centre once a year for a general check-up - this is a good way to prevent health problems.
Menopause is Nothing to Fear

It’s simply a time when a woman’s body goes through changes (just as it does in pregnancy and adolescence). For most women these changes won’t cause any great problems. Although one third of women will have distressing symptoms, another third will have no symptoms at all, while another third will have only mild symptoms.

- What Sort of Symptoms Do You Notice?

Hot flushes - you may feel a prickly sensation in the skin followed by a hot, flushed feeling which usually starts in the face and neck. You may also feel sweaty all over. Then, as the hot feeling goes, you may suddenly feel very cold. However, it’s different for all women, and some women never have a hot flush. Others have them only occasionally, while others may have them frequently during the day or night.

- What Can You Do About Hot Flushes?

Hot flushes seems to be made worse by anxiety and stress, so finding ways of avoiding or relieving stress may help. Other things that can trigger a hot flush include alcohol, hot food and drink, hot weather, a warm room or a warm bed. If hot flushes are distressing, ask your doctor for advice. Some women find other remedies helpful such as evening primrose oil or sage tea (1 to 3 cups daily). (For more information see the section Other Remedies for Symptoms of Menopause in Part 3).
• **Vaginal Problems**

The hormonal changes in your body can make the lining of the vagina thinner, drier and less "elastic". This can make intercourse uncomfortable. Continuing to have sex regularly will help keep the vagina moist and healthy. You may need a vaginal lubricant such as KY Jelly or Lubafax. You can buy these at chemists (usually on shelves near contraceptives) and at some supermarkets (often near tampons and sanitary pads or condoms). But don’t use Vaseline or other creams and lotions as lubricants. If nothing seems to help, see your doctor.

If your vaginal lining becomes thinner and drier it can be more prone to infections. If you notice any itching or unusual discharge (especially a bloodstained discharge), see your doctor.

• **Bladder Problems**

Hormonal changes can also weaken the muscles which support the bladder. This can make bladder control difficult especially when you laugh, sneeze or cough. If you ignore this problem it will get worse, so it’s important to do something about it as soon as possible. Most women can overcome the problem by learning simple exercises to strengthen the bladder muscles.

A nurse continence adviser can show you what to do. These nurses are specially trained to give women confidential advice and treatment for bladder problems. Ask the ethnic health worker at your local community health centre how to contact the nearest continence adviser.
• **Mood Changes**

Some women find they feel more tense, irritable and depressed during the menopause. They may also experience loss of sexual desire. If you think that physical symptoms are making you feel depressed, see your doctor.

But we can’t blame all our problems on menopause - the mid-40s and 50s are a time when many women feel “squeezed” between the demands of elderly parents and problems with teenage children. Some women may feel they are no longer needed by their children - or they may even be coping with someone who is also feeling moody because of age.
◆ What Can You Do?

If you have problems caused by either the menopause or other changes in your life, it helps to talk about them. Try talking to a friend or ask if your community health centre has a bi-lingual counsellor you can talk to. Some community health centres also have special groups where non-English-speaking women in their middle years can get together and talk.

It’s a good idea to look at your life and see if there are ways of making it less stressful. You could also learn some simple techniques which will help you relax and cope better with stress. Ask the ethnic health worker if there are any ways of learning about these techniques in your area (some community health centres have courses or audio tapes to teach relaxation).
◆ What if Your Doctor Prescribes Tranquillisers or Sleeping Pills?

Whenever a doctor prescribes any drug for you, it's important to ask him or her some questions about it - remember that it's your right to ask for information about things that concern your health. Here are some questions to ask:

- What is the drug you are prescribing?
- How long should I take it for?
- How should I stop taking it?
- What could I do instead of taking pills that might help me?

These questions are particularly important if a doctor prescribes tranquillisers (such as Valium, Serepax, Ativan or Mogadon) for problems associated with menopause. These pills can be useful for a week or so - they can help you feel better during a serious crisis, for instance. But for many women, tranquillisers become an everyday habit which only causes more problems. One of the problems is that after you've been taking tranquillisers for a while, they don't work so well. After two weeks, their ability to calm you down decreases. If they're used as sleeping pills, they can stop working after only three nights. This means that to get the same effect you need to take more.
Eventually many women find they can't cope without tranquilisers because their bodies have become dependent on them. This means that when they stop taking the pills, they get unpleasant symptoms called withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms, which include anxiety and sleeplessness, are like the problems which make the women take the pills in the first place. (It can also be dangerous to stop taking tranquilisers suddenly - people who want to stop should talk to a doctor or health worker first.)

So, if you feel anxious for some reason, there may be other ways to make you feel better such as relaxation techniques or more exercise. Some community health centres have bi-lingual counsellors who are specially trained to help with these problems. Or contact a women's health centre - some of them also have workers who can help.
◆ Other Difficulties with Menopause

Some women experience other problems such as a tingling sensation under the skin (it feels as if ants are crawling under your skin). They may also have headaches, lack of energy and feel bloated sometimes.

◆ Where to Go for More Information and Help

You can get advice on menopause, Pap smears and breast examination from women's health centres, Family Planning clinics and menopause clinics at some large hospitals. Ask the ethnic health worker where to find the nearest centre or clinic. Addresses of Family Planning clinics are in the white pages of the telephone book. Some hospitals also have special menopause clinics - again, the ethnic health worker can tell you where the nearest clinic is.

You can ask for a trained interpreter if necessary. This service is free and confidential.
Why Your Family and Friends Should Read This Pamphlet

They need information too - it makes it easier for them to give you support if you need it. It's a good idea for younger women to read about menopause too - there is information available to help women prepare for good health in mid-life.
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EXERCISE AND DIET
(HOW THEY CAN HELP)
How Exercise and Diet Can Help

Menopause (and just about everything else in life) is easier to cope with if you feel fit and healthy. Regular exercise and the right food give you more energy, make you feel and look better, help you lose weight and prevent constipation.

Some women in their middle years have more time for activities that keep them fit, such as walking, swimming and gardening. But even if you are very busy, try to make exercise a priority. Going for walks as often as you can (at least three 20 to 30 minute walks each week) will help you to feel relaxed and to sleep better.

Include plenty of bread, cereals, grains, dried peas and beans, fruit and vegetables in your diet. For more information, ask your community health centre for the pamphlet The Pyramid Way to Healthy Eating.
◆ Keeping Bones Strong

We need plenty of calcium for healthy bones. Menopause causes women to gradually lose some of the calcium in their bones. For many women the bones become brittle and easily broken (this problem is called osteoporosis).

Help prevent this before and after the menopause by eating plenty of foods that contain calcium. These foods include:

- Dairy foods - milk, yoghurt, and cheese
  (including low fat milk, yoghurt and cheese)
- Tinned fish such as sardines and salmon
  (eat the bones too)
- Tofu
- Hummus
- Almonds, Brazil nuts and hazel nuts
- Broccoli
- Figs

You may be already cooking meat in a way that helps you get more calcium from your diet - adding a little vinegar or lemon juice to stews or soup made from meat bones "draws" the calcium out of the bones into the cooking liquid.
What if you don't eat many calcium-rich foods? Ask your doctor or a dietician about using calcium supplements.
◆ Other ways to keep bones strong

- Take plenty of exercise such as walking and dancing.
- Don't smoke. Avoid too much alcohol and coffee.
- Some women may also need hormone replacement therapy (see Part 3: Hormone Replacement Therapy and other remedies).

◆ Tips for a Healthy Heart

You can help prevent heart disease (and many other serious problems) if you avoid cigarettes and fatty foods, and get plenty of exercise. These things are important at any age - but are even more important at menopause when women stop producing hormones which help protect them against heart disease.
Sexuality in Mid-Life

For some women, freedom from family responsibilities and worries about pregnancy improve enjoyment of sex. Fertility, remember, isn’t the same as sexuality. Just because you are no longer fertile doesn’t mean you can’t have sex - some women have more time to enjoy it. If you use contraception, you’ll need to continue it for one year after your last period.
◆ What Health Checks Do You Need?

- A Pap test

Women whose previous Pap tests have been normal need this test once every two years. Women who have had abnormal tests or other symptoms may need more frequent tests as advised by their doctor. This painless test takes about five minutes and involves taking a sample of cells from the narrow "end" of the womb, nearest the vagina. A doctor, women's health centre or Family Planning clinic can do the test.

- Breast examination

When you have your Pap test, it's also a good time for a doctor to check your breasts for lumps which could be an early symptom of breast cancer. Finding out early and having treatment can mean breast cancer can be cured. You need to check your breasts for lumps yourself each month (a doctor can show you how, or you can ask the ethnic health worker for a leaflet about it).
• Regular mammograms (breast X-rays) every two years
Women aged 50 or over should have a mammogram every two years to check for early signs of breast cancer. Ask your community health centre or doctor for information about free or low cost mammograms.
* Where to Go for More Information and Help

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