



# MENOPAUSE

Menopause is the time when a woman stops having her menstrual periods.

It marks the end of her fertile years, just as the first period in adolescence marks the beginning. The fall in hormone levels that occurs during this time can cause other changes in a woman's body. Understanding menopause and preparing for it in a positive way will help each woman make the change.

For most women, menopause spans a 2-6 year period, between 45-60 years of age. The average age of menopause for Australian women is 51 years.

Menopause can involve a sudden or gradual loss of the two female hormones, oestrogen and progesterone, which are produced by the ovaries. These hormones can influence a woman's mood, weight, body shape, appetite, skin, sex drive, bladder and sexual function, blood vessels and bone density.

Some women have symptoms as their hormone levels fall. However, many women generally feel well during menopause, with the occasional problem.

## Signs and symptoms

- Irregular periods (as hormone levels change)
- Hot flushes, night sweats
- Dryness or itching in the vagina which may make sex uncomfortable
- Dizziness, rapid beating of the heart
- Crawling or itching sensations under the skin
- Headache, joint, neck or back ache
- Emotional changes - loss of confidence, anxiety, being irritable, crying a lot, reduced interest in sex, difficulty sleeping, being tired
- Frequent desire to pass urine.

These symptoms may start years before your periods stop.



## Hormone Replacement Therapy

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) replaces the hormones your ovaries used to make.

HRT may be used before, during and after menopause. Your doctor may prescribe HRT to relieve symptoms of menopause including hot flushes, poor sleep and vaginal dryness. Your doctor may also recommend HRT if you are at risk of developing heart disease or osteoporosis, or if you have gone through menopause early due to disease or removal of the ovaries or uterus.

HRT is available in different forms - tablets, patches, creams or gels to apply to the skin and vaginal medicine with a special applicator.

Discuss all the pros and cons of using any form of HRT with your doctor. Give yourself the time to find the type of HRT that suits you best.

Note: HRT should not be confused with other methods to relieve symptoms of menopause, such as phytoestrogens. Phytoestrogens are naturally occurring substances that are similar to female hormones. They may relieve some symptoms of menopause in some women, but they do not treat the other effects of menopause, such as heart disease or thinning of the bones. Like HRT, phytoestrogens are not suitable for all women.

## Risks

After menopause, lower amounts of female hormones in the body may lead to:

- Thinning of the bones and, later, breaks
- Sagging of the uterus and/or vagina and, later, prolapse
- Urine leaks when sneezing, coughing or on sudden exertion
- Increased risk of heart disease.

## Self care

- Learn all you can about menopause.
- If hot flushes are a problem, wear cotton clothes and take luke-warm showers.
- Continue to use some form of contraception for one year after your last period.
- A vaginal lubricant may make intercourse more comfortable (ask your pharmacist).
- Stop smoking (see *Smoking* fact cards).
- Examine your breasts regularly and have routine pap tests and mammograms (see *Breast Self Examination/Pap Test* Fact Card).
- Do not ignore unusual signs and symptoms such as lumps in the breast, heavy bleeding, painful intercourse (see your doctor).
- Have your blood pressure and cholesterol level checked regularly.
- Talk to your doctor about checks for osteoporosis (see *Osteoporosis* Fact Card).
- Seek support from your friends and family.

## Healthy eating

Increase your calcium intake. Women at menopause are advised to have 1,000 to 1,200mg of calcium per day. You can get this from three serves of any of the following each day: one cup of low fat milk, 200g of low fat yoghurt, or 35g of cheese. You can also ask your pharmacist about a calcium supplement.

- Eat less fat (see *Fat & Cholesterol* Fact Card).
- Reduce your salt intake (see *High Blood Pressure* Fact Card).
- Drink 6-8 glasses of water per day (check with your doctor first if you have kidney or heart problems).

## Exercise

- Exercise regularly e.g. walking, swimming, cycling (see *Exercise & the Heart* Fact Card).
- Learn to relax (see *Relaxation Techniques* Fact Card).
- Do your pelvic floor exercises daily (see *Pelvic Floor Exercises* and *Urine & Bladder Control* Fact Cards).

## Other relevant fact cards

- *Breast Self Examination & Pap Test*
- *High Blood Pressure*
- *Smoking cards*
- *Exercise & the Heart*
- *Fat & Cholesterol*
- *Pelvic Floor Exercises*
- *Osteoporosis*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Urine & Bladder Control*

## Contact

**A doctor** – listed under Medical Practitioners in the yellow pages of the phone book.

**Family Planning Association** – listed under 'F' in the white pages of the phone book.

**A local women's or community health centre** – listed in the white pages of the phone book.

**The Australasian Menopause Society** – [www.menopause.org.au](http://www.menopause.org.au)

**Your Self Care pharmacist.** To find: (02) 6283 4777.

In case of poisoning, phone the **Poisons Information Centre** on 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask your pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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