

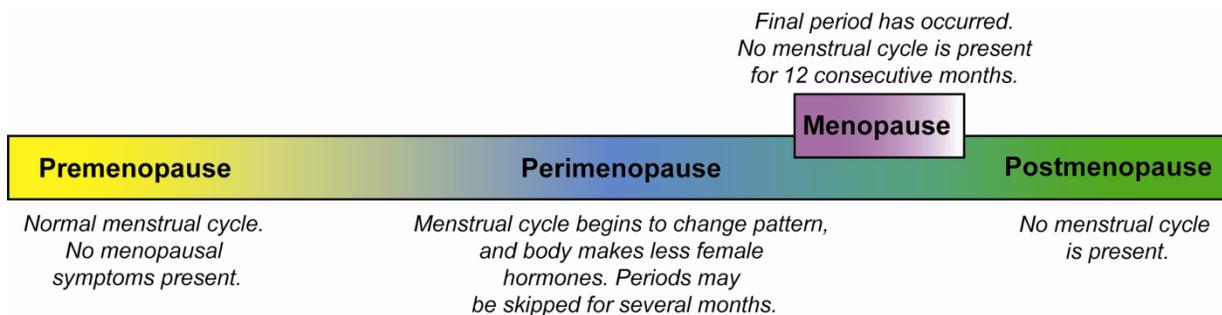
## Menopause

### What is menopause?

Menopause occurs when a woman's ovaries stop functioning. When this happens, the menstrual cycle ends. The average age for menopause in American women is 51.

Women who have had a hysterectomy (surgical removal of the uterus) but whose ovaries still function will experience natural menopause. Women who have had their ovaries removed will experience premature menopause (menopause that occurs before the normal age). Women who have undergone cancer treatment also may experience premature menopause caused by surgery (removal of the ovaries), chemotherapy or radiation.

### What are the phases of menopause?



When menopause begins and how long it lasts varies from woman to woman.

**Premenopause** – In the premenopausal years, a woman has a normal menstrual cycle and is not experiencing symptoms of menopause.

**Perimenopause** – The transitional period before menstruation ends is called perimenopause. During perimenopause, hormones that control the menstrual cycles slowly begin to change their pattern, and a woman's body begins making less female hormones (estrogen and progesterone).

Periods may become irregular and a woman may start to experience menopausal symptoms. Perimenopausal symptoms can last from two to six years; although some women have symptoms for a shorter amount of time and others longer. During this time a woman is still ovulating and may become pregnant.

**Menopause** – Menopause occurs when a woman has experienced her final menstrual period and has not had a period for 12 consecutive months.

**Postmenopause** – After 12 consecutive months without a menstrual period, a woman is considered postmenopausal, meaning there will be no periods throughout the rest of her life.

## **How is menopause diagnosed?**

For most women, no testing is necessary. If needed, blood tests can rule out other health problems and confirm whether a woman is experiencing menopause. These tests measure hormone levels such as follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), estrogen, and or luteinizing hormone (LH).

## **What are the symptoms of menopause and postmenopause?**

Each woman experiences menopause symptoms differently. In fact, some women have no symptoms other than their menstrual periods stopping.

In addition to menstrual cycle changes, the most common symptoms are:

- Moodiness and/or irritability
- Decreased sex drive
- Difficulty concentrating
- Headaches
- Sleep disturbances (i.e. night sweats)
- Hot flashes
- Vaginal dryness
- Joint and muscle aches
- Hair loss
- Frequent urination
- Symptoms similar to premenstrual syndrome (PMS)

Some postmenopausal women continue to have menopausal symptoms. In addition, they may have heart palpitations (an unusual awareness of you own heartbeat), loss of bladder control or more frequent urinary tract infections. Postmenopausal women may also have a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Postmenopausal women are also at greater risk for osteoporosis (thinning bones). After menopause, bone diminishes faster than it is formed, which leads to weaker bones. Maintaining bone mass is important for keeping bones healthy. A Bone Mineral Density test (BMD) is one way to diagnose osteoporosis. For more information, see the patient education documents “Osteoporosis” and/or “Bone Mineral Density Test”.

## **How are the symptoms of menopause treated?**

Lifestyle changes, such as the following, are the best and healthiest way to manage menopausal symptoms:

- Exercising regularly
- Adding soy and flax to their diet
- Increasing the amount of calcium and vitamin D in their diet
- Finding ways to reduce stress
- Getting enough rest
- Avoiding hot flash triggers (i.e., coffee, tea, and alcohol)
- Smoking cessation

Medications and supplements are also available to help relieve menopausal symptoms. These include:

- Low-dose birth control pills - to keep hormone levels more constant while transitioning into menopause
- Hormone Therapy (HT). See “Hormone Replacement Therapy”.
- Anti-depressants – to minimize hot flashes and stabilize mood swings
- Others – for more information, please see “Hot Flash Symptom Management” and/or “Vaginal Dryness”.

Some women find that herbal remedies such as ginseng, St. John’s wort, Ginkgo biloba, evening primrose oil, and black cohosh help reduce symptoms. Talk with a health care provider before taking any of these, as some may have side effects or interact with other medicines.

Women who have been diagnosed with a hormonally influenced cancer, such as estrogen receptor positive (ER+) breast cancer, should be cautious because some herbs and foods contain estrogen-like properties (e.g., soy, flax, red clover, and possibly black cohosh and dong quai). They should talk with their health care provider, pharmacist, or dietitian if they have any questions.

## **What is Hormone Therapy (HT)?**

HT is the use of prescription estrogen, progesterone and less commonly, testosterone, to reduce menopausal symptoms. The purpose of HT is not to replace hormones in the body, but to use the least amount of hormones possible to reduce bothersome symptoms.

HT comes in many forms, including pills, patches, vaginal creams, vaginal rings, suppositories, or long-acting injections (shots). Research, however, has found certain health risks associated with HT. Women should ask their health care provider if using HT is the best choice for them. The provider can identify personal risk factors and help women make an informed decision. For more information, see “Hormone Replacement Therapy”.

## **Resources for Patients and Their Families**

### **The Learning Center**

The Learning Center is a free consumer health library with the latest information on cancer care, support, prevention and general health and wellness issues. Knowledgeable staff and volunteers help visitors locate the information they need. The Learning Center provides access to brochures, journals, reference books, online health databases, magazines and newsletters, audio and videotapes and Web sites. Locations include:

- Levit Learning Center  
Mays Clinic, Floor 2, near The Tree Sculpture, Room ACB2.1120, 713-563-8010
- Law Learning Center  
Main Building, Floor 4, near Elevator A, Room R4.1100, 713-745-8063

## **Other resources**

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)**

202-638-5577

[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)

### **National Cancer Institute (NCI)**

#### **Cancer Information Service (CIS)**

800-4-CANCER (800-422-6237)

<http://cis.nci.nih.gov>

### **NIH Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases – National Resource Center**

800-624 BONE (800- 624-3663)

[www.osteoporosis.org](http://www.osteoporosis.org)

### **North American Menopause Society**

404-442-7550

[www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)

### **Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.**

800-230-PLAN (800-230-7526)

[www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)

### **The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) Information Center**

301-592-8573

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

### **The National Institute on Aging (NIA)**

800-222-2225

[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

### **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Women’s Health**

<http://www.4women.gov/menopause/>