

WOMEN & MENOPAUSE



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About this booklet

The aim of this booklet is to help answer some of the questions you may have about the menopause. It explains what the menopause is, what you can expect and provides information about how to manage some of the symptoms you may experience.

This booklet was developed in collaboration with women in Zimbabwe who advised us on what information to include and helped us to design the resource. We also worked closely with researchers, healthcare professionals and menopause specialists to develop this information.

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What is menopause?

Menopause is when a woman no longer has her periods. It is the last day of a woman's last period ever and when you have gone for 12 months without any period at all. Some women call it the 'change of life'. It is a normal part of getting older and happens to every woman.

What causes menopause?

Menopause is caused by changes in the hormones in your body. Hormones are chemicals produced by the body that signal to organs and tissues to tell them what to do. From the time you had your first period, these hormones have helped you to have regular periods every month and have caused ovulation (when an egg from your ovaries inside your body is released each month so that you can have a baby). When you reach menopause, your ovaries no longer release an egg every month, so you cannot become pregnant anymore.

How do you know when you are in menopause?

If you are in your mid-40's or older and haven't had a period at all for 12 months in a row you can usually be confident that you are in menopause. However, certain things such as losing too much weight, lots of stress and smoking, can make your periods stop or cause an earlier menopause. It is important to know that some menopause symptoms can be very similar to some symptoms caused by certain health problems or medicines, and may not be caused by your ovaries getting older, so it's good to be aware of these. If you do not think that the reason for these health issues and symptoms is because you are moving towards your menopause, you should talk this through with your doctor or clinic sister.



What happens when you are in menopause?

You don't usually become menopausal suddenly. In the time leading up to menopause your hormones start to rise and fall causing some changes in your body. The changes in your body happen slowly as you move towards the time of menopause. The time when you are moving into menopause is called the 'menopause transition' also known as the 'perimenopause', when you may notice some physical and emotional changes happening to you.

Leading up to menopause, you will notice that your periods start to change. These changes are often different in each woman. Sometimes you will miss a period, sometimes periods are much heavier than usual or much lighter and sometimes you may miss a period for a month or two and then they start again. These changes can carry on for a few months or even years before periods stop completely. In some women periods can just stop suddenly. Every woman's experience of her menopause is different.

What age do women go through menopause?

Menopause is a natural part of getting older and can happen between 45 and 55 years of age. The average age for a woman to reach menopause is around 50.

Why is age at menopause different for different women?

All women are different and just as you may have started your periods at an earlier or later age than your friends, you may have your menopause earlier or later than other women you know. Several things can affect the age at which you will become menopausal. The most important is the age at which your mother had her menopause. You will probably become menopausal around the same age as your mother had her menopause, give or take a few years. But this is not always true, and there are other factors that can affect your age at menopause. These include certain illnesses and health conditions, some medications, treatment for cancers, and also your lifestyle. Smoking is a reason why some women have an earlier menopause because smoking can damage your ovaries so they do not work as well as they should. So, if you smoke but your mother did not it is likely that you will become menopausal earlier than she did. If you are very very thin your periods may stop, and you may have an early (premature) menopause.

Why do some women go through menopause early?

Around 1 in 100 women experience their menopause before 40 years of age. This is known as early menopause. In most cases there's no clear cause.

Is there anything I can do to stop going through menopause?

No. We will all go through the menopause at a different time in our lives. It is a natural part of getting older that we as women will all go through.



What symptoms can you get with menopause?

Most women will experience some menopausal symptoms. These will probably start some time before you have your last period during the 'perimenopause'. These symptoms can be uncomfortable and sometimes very troublesome. Some symptoms include:



The time it takes to become menopausal can be short (up to two years), or long (up to 14 years). All women are different, so how you experience menopause may not be the same as your friends. Although you and many other women may struggle in the years leading up to menopause, some women have no problems at all. Once you are fully into menopause the hot flushes and other symptoms usually stop, although some women, especially those who experience a sudden menopause due to

having an operation to remove their womb or who receive certain rarely used medicines, may experience symptoms into their 80's.

Many women get a dry vagina which may cause sex to be uncomfortable or painful. A low sex drive (not wanting to have sex) is also common and some women experience urinary problems (pain when urinating or urinary infections) after they have reached the menopause.

What can you do to manage the symptoms of menopause?

Dealing with hot flushes and night sweats

- Try to wear loose comfortable clothes that are made only of cotton, so that the fabric breathes.
- When it is cold, try to wear layers so you can take something off if you get too hot.
- Carry a small spray bottle of water and spray it on the back of your neck, wrists and knees when you feel a hot flush coming on. Keep one next to your bed at night. You could also carry a bottle of water or a fan to help you cool down.
- Do not have spicy foods like curry or very hot food.
- Drink tea or coffee at room temperature.
- Do not overeat and don't drink too much alcohol or coffee.
- Do not smoke.
- Stress can make you have a hot flush, so try to relax and stay calm.

- If you feel stressed practice breathing calmly. Breathe in through your nose with your mouth for four counts. Hold the breath for four counts and let it out slowly through your mouth for four counts. Repeat this for a minute or two.

Dealing with weight gain

- Having a healthy diet and being physically active are very important. See below for more information on this.

Dealing with uncomfortable sex

- If sex is uncomfortable there are creams and moisturizers that sometimes help with vaginal dryness. Lubricants (gels) can also make sex more comfortable. These can be bought from local pharmacies. Please note these should not have any perfumes or flavourings. Please do not use household products such as cooking oil or vaseline. This is because they can increase the likelihood of infection and damage condoms if you are using them.
- Doctors can also prescribe estrogen cream that can be applied to a dry vagina. This can be used twice a week to relieve painful sex due to menopause.



Hormone replacement therapy

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is the most effective treatment if you are really battling with menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes. Your doctor should advise you of the risks and benefits and decide if it is suitable for you. If you use this treatment, your doctor will ask you to attend reviews to check whether you still need to use it. HRT usually comes as a tablet to take every day. Doctors need to prescribe HRT and you would need to pay for this medicine.

For women who can't take HRT, there are sometimes other treatments; ask your doctor or clinic sister about them.

Is going through menopause different for women living with HIV?

Women with HIV go through menopause at a similar age to women who do not have HIV. If you have HIV, the experiences and symptoms you have as you become menopausal should not be different from women who are not HIV positive. Because becoming menopausal can make some women feel depressed and anxious, some women living with HIV may be more troubled by anxiety and depression and may find that these symptoms become worse during this time. As explained above, every woman's symptoms through menopause are different. You may be fortunate and not experience many symptoms even if you have HIV, or you may have several symptoms for many years.

Some women living with HIV struggle with their menopausal symptoms and they may find it hard to manage their HIV. Sometimes it is difficult to take HIV medicines, or to go to clinic appointments, which can make your health worse. If this happens to you, speak to the nurse or doctor at your HIV clinic and ask them to help you with your menopausal symptoms. Importantly HIV treatment still works well when you are going through the menopause.

How do women's bodies change when they go through menopause?

The changes in our hormones can cause changes to our bodies. In the time leading up to menopause, breasts can often feel bigger and sometimes very tender. It becomes easier to put on weight, and a lot of women put on about 2.5kgs at this time. At this time, some women also find that if they eat sweets or cake when they are feeling anxious or depressed, they will feel better. But this feeling doesn't last long, and you may feel even more depressed if you are overweight. You don't need to put on weight during this time, not everyone does.

The information below will explain how you can maintain a healthy weight during menopause. You may also find that you lose some hair, and sometimes women find that they grow hair on their face. You may also find that your eyes feel dryer.



How should women look after themselves when they are entering midlife?

Many women put on some weight as they move into menopause, so it is very important to watch what you eat and have a healthy diet. To do this you should aim to:

Eat fresh fruit and vegetables:

Fresh fruit and vegetables are low in fat and contain lots of essential vitamins and minerals.



High fibre foods:

High fibre foods are good for your heart and help you stay healthy. These include oats and brown rice. Sweet potatoes, green vegetables and beans are also helpful.



Get enough calcium:

Calcium is a mineral that helps to keep your bones strong and is very important for women who are going into the menopause. Foods that are high in calcium include dairy foods like milk and yoghurt, fish with bones such as kapenta, and green leafy vegetables like okra.



Get enough protein:

Protein helps you to build muscle and stay strong. Foods that contain protein include beans and peas, nuts, fish, eggs and meat like chicken and beef.



Only eat as much food as you need:

It is important that you only eat as much as you need to stay healthy and active. If you eat more than this you will gain weight, even if the food is healthy.

Eat less 'white' starchy foods:

White starchy foods are not as healthy as brown foods. These white starch foods include sadza, white rice and white bread. Eat less of these.



Cut down on sugary foods, sweets and drinks:

Sugary foods and cold drinks are high in sugar. They are not healthy and make you gain weight. Where possible cut out all sugary drinks and try to have fewer spoons of sugar in your tea or coffee. Sometimes it is hard to give up sweet things, but you can begin by cutting down the number of teaspoons of sugar you have in your tea slowly so you will get used to having less sugar and still enjoy your hot drink.



Eat less fat:

Fat is an important part of your diet. However, some kinds of fat are healthier than others. Healthy fats include avocados and nuts. But try to avoid eating too much unhealthy fat found in fatty foods such as cakes, biscuits, pastries and butter, as these may make you gain weight.



Eat less salt:

Salt is one of the main causes of high blood pressure. To reduce your salt, try to eat fewer salty snacks like chips and don't add it to your cooking and meals.



Drink plenty of water:

Drink at least 6 glasses of water each day



Stay active:

It is important to be as physically active as you can - try not to sit for long periods of time. You should do at least 3 hours of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity each week. This includes brisk walking, dancing, aerobics and busy housework. If you are not used to being physically active, start slowly and build up. Regular exercise can also help you sleep better.



What happens to the blood from your period when you go through menopause?

When you are a young woman, each month hormones in your body make your womb ready in case you get pregnant. They do this by building up the womb lining. If you don't get pregnant, the womb lining bleeds away and the blood comes out through your vagina. After each period the womb gets ready again, just in case you might get pregnant, and this goes on every month until you reach menopause. When you can no longer get pregnant (because your ovaries stop releasing an egg each month), the womb doesn't need to prepare for pregnancy, and no lining is built and you don't bleed anymore. It is important to remember that if you are in menopause and have not bled at all for 12 months (1 year), if you start to bleed again, even if it is a small amount of blood, then you must see your clinic sister and/or doctor as this is not normal and can be a sign of disease in the womb.

Can you still get pregnant when you are going through menopause?

When you have finally reached the menopause, you can no longer get pregnant. But if you do not want to have a baby, be careful not to become pregnant by mistake. Even if your periods are not regular when you are getting older, you can still become pregnant. Until you are absolutely sure that you haven't had a single period for at least 12 months, you should still use contraception during sex if you do not want to get pregnant.

Is there any such thing as a chimimba muteku (menopausal belly)?

Changes in our hormones change the shape of our bodies and it becomes easier to put on weight. If we get fat this will increase the size of our belly. If you develop a menopausal belly, this is caused by fat around the belly. Periods are not needed to wash away dirt or semen. When you have had sex, when you stand up the semen will run out of your vagina. This is the same before and after menopause. If you have sex after the menopause, dirt and/or semen does not build up inside the body because they come out of your vagina, often we don't notice them coming out.

Can going through menopause affect your sex life?

Can a man feel the difference?

Going through the menopause often affects your sex life. Changes in your hormones mean you may feel less desire to have sex during and after menopause. These changes may mean your vagina feels dry, and this may make it uncomfortable for you to have sex. These changes are a normal part of menopause. Although you may feel less desire to have sex, when you do have sex, it feels the same for the man. Sexual desire may improve when your menopausal symptoms become less severe.

Can going through menopause cause health problems such as cancer?

No. However, it is always important to be responsible for your health. Always report any unusual symptoms to your clinic sister and/or doctor.



Can menopause affect my bones?

Changes in hormones affect our bones and after the menopause our bones can break more easily, such as breaking a wrist from a fall. The bones in our spines can also be affected which can make some women become shorter. Keeping active and having calcium in your diet is good for your bones. See the information below.

What can I do to keep my bones healthy?

Our bones keep changing throughout our lives trying to stay healthy. If you eat the right foods with enough calcium in your diet, stay active and lead a healthy lifestyle, you can help your body to build and maintain strong bones for as long as possible. Bones stay strong if you give them work to do. To keep your bones strong, you need to do both:

➤ **Weight-bearing exercise with impact.** Impacts are felt when you are on your feet and you add force or a jolt through your body. This could be anything from walking, skipping, running or jumping. You are weight-bearing when you are standing, with the weight of your whole body helping your bones to stay strong.

➤ **Muscle strengthening exercise.** When your muscles pull on your bones it gives your bones work to do. Then your bones keep their strength. As your muscles get stronger, they pull harder, meaning your bones are more likely to become stronger. To strengthen your muscles, you need to move them against some resistance. Increasing muscle resistance can be done by adding a load for the muscles to work against, such as lifting a weight in your hand above your head, or squatting down and standing up again. As your muscles get stronger and you find the movements easier, you can gradually increase the weight of what you lift.

Remember, menopause is a new phase of life for you. We hope this information is useful and will help you live a full and active life during this change.



