

Health Risks of Menopause

“Women who have the most severe menopausal symptoms may also be at a higher risk of cardiovascular disease. The connection between severity of symptoms and heart disease risk may be the result of reduced beneficial effects of estrogen on the functioning of blood vessel walls, as estrogen declines during menopause.”

~National Institute of Health

What is Menopause?

Menopause refers to a natural stop in a woman’s menstrual period and fertility. Menopause happens because the woman’s ovary stops producing two hormones: estrogen and progesterone.

Usually between the ages of 40 and 55 a woman will go through menopause. A woman has reached menopause when she has gone 12 months without having a period.

Signs and Symptoms

A woman can have symptoms of menopause before she fully reaches the menopause stage. This stage is called “peri-menopause” and symptoms can begin several years prior.

Menopause and the years leading up to it affect every woman differently. Some common symptoms include:

- Changes in periods (they may be shorter or longer, heavier or lighter, or have more or less time in between)
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Trouble sleeping through the night
- Vaginal dryness
- Mood changes
- Hair loss or thinning on the head, more hair growth on the face

Health Problems associated with Menopause

Depression

Depression during menopause is very common. Symptoms can be:

- Two or more weeks of depressed mood
- Decreased interest or pleasure in activities
- Change in appetite
- Change in sleep patterns
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Excessive feeling of guilt or worthlessness
- Thoughts of suicide
- Extreme restlessness and irritability

Many symptoms of menopause overlap with symptoms of depression. Some women suffer



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unnecessarily because they think these discomforts and problems are a natural part of aging. Depression should not be dismissed as a normal consequence of later life for women.

Depression that goes untreated can lead to more severe episodes of depression and even physical complications such as heart attacks or osteoporosis.

Diabetes

If you are currently living with diabetes, menopause — and the years leading up to it — may present unique challenges for you. Some of those challenges can be:

- *Changes in blood sugar level.* The hormones estrogen and progesterone affect how your cells respond to insulin.
- *Weight gain.* Some women gain weight during menopause which can increase the need for insulin or oral diabetes medication.
- *Infections.* After menopause — when a drop in estrogen makes it easier for bacteria and yeast to thrive in the urinary tract and vagina — the risk is even higher.
- *Sleep problems.* During menopause, hot flashes and night sweats may keep you up at night; therefore, the sleep deprivation can make it tougher to manage your blood sugar level.

Heart Disease

Because women's bodies produce less estrogen after menopause (usually around the age of 55), the chance of getting heart disease increases. Women who have gone through early menopause, either naturally or because they have had a hysterectomy, are twice as likely to develop heart disease as women of the same age who have not yet gone through menopause.

While certain risk factors cannot be changed, like age, it is important to realize that you do have control over many others. Regardless of your age, background, or health status, you can lower your risk of

heart disease by doing the following:

- Taking a brisk walk a few times a week to increase physical activity
- Incorporating more lean protein, fruits and vegetables into your diet
- Reducing the amount of trans and saturated fat in your diet
- Quitting smoking
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Lowering your blood pressure if it's high
- Reducing your LDL cholesterol level if it's high

Osteoporosis

The loss of estrogen in a woman's body can lead to osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is a condition where bones become weak and break easily. Your doctor will discuss various options for diagnosing osteoporosis, including x-rays, lab tests and scans. Once you and your doctor have definitive information based on your history, physical examination, and diagnostic tests, a specific treatment program can be developed for you. However, recommendations for optimizing bone health include a comprehensive program that consists of:

- A well-balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D
- Daily calcium supplements or multi-vitamin
- Physical activity
- No smoking
- Avoiding excessive alcohol use

When you begin to have signs and symptoms of menopause, talk to your health care provider. Through open discussions, you both will decide what treatments and methods are best for your situation.

For more information on menopause and the health risks associated with it, visit www.womenshealth.gov.



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