

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MENOPAUSE

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Menopause?

Menopause is when a woman's menstrual periods stop, meaning that her reproductive years have come to an end. The natural process leading up to the final period, called perimenopause, happens over several years. It typically begins when a woman reaches her mid-40s to early 50s but may happen earlier. Smoking, oral birth control, surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation may cause menopause to occur earlier.

What Are Common Symptoms?

Symptoms are caused by changing hormone levels and can vary from woman to woman. The most common symptoms leading up to menopause include:

- Irregular periods
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Vaginal dryness

How Is It Diagnosed?

- Your doctor will consider your age and ask about your symptoms and menstrual changes.
- Menopause is diagnosed after you have gone 12 months without a menstrual period.
- Blood tests are usually not needed to diagnose menopause. However, if you have a history of other menstrual conditions, your doctor may run blood tests to look at your hormone levels. This can help your doctor rule out other conditions and confirm menopause.

How Is It Treated?

- Lifestyle changes like quitting smoking, limiting alcohol use, exercising, and maintaining a healthy weight may make symptoms less severe.
- Hormone therapy is the first treatment for women with moderate to severe hot flashes and night sweats. It is also an effective treatment for vaginal dryness.
- The most common side effects of hormone therapy are breast soreness and vaginal bleeding. Hormone therapy may increase the risk for serious health problems like blood clots, heart



attacks, strokes, breast cancer, and gallbladder disease. Risk level depends on age, length of treatment, and other factors. Talk to your doctor about your personal risk, benefits, and preferences before starting hormone therapy.

- You should be monitored for 4 to 6 weeks after starting treatment to make sure it is working for your symptoms and to assess side effects.
- If you are not interested in hormone therapy or there is a medical reason why you should not take it (for example, a history of breast or endometrial cancer, heart disease or stroke, or recent blood clots), nonhormonal prescription drugs have been shown to improve hot flashes and night sweats.
- For isolated symptoms of vaginal dryness or itching, painful urination, or pain during sex, nonhormonal treatments are usually recommended first. These include vaginal moisturizers and lubricants. If these are not effective, low-dose vaginal estrogen is likely to relieve these symptoms with little risk.

Questions for My Doctor

- Should I take hormone therapy?
- What are the benefits and risks?
- What nonhormonal treatments can help ease my symptoms?
- Will lifestyle changes help my symptoms?
- How often should I be seen for follow-up?

For More Information



American College of Physicians
Leading Internal Medicine, Improving Lives

MedlinePlus

<https://medlineplus.gov/menopause.html>

National Institute on Aging

www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-menopause