

Menopause and Its Effect on Women

Ruchi Singh

Ph.D. Scholar Dept. of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community and Applied Sciences, MPUAT, Udaipur, Rajasthan

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Cessation of menstrual cycle is known as menopause. Every woman experiences it differently and can last for years. It signals end of body's ability to reproduce. It occurs in 3 stages.

- 1. Perimenopause:** A period of transition and beginning of menopause. This includes 12 months that follow a woman's last period. Pregnancy is still possible during perimenopause. Contraception is recommended to avoid unintended pregnancy until after 12 consecutive months without menstruation.
- 2. Menopause:** Starts 12 months after the last period or when menstruation has stopped for a clinical reason such as removal of ovaries.
- 3. Post menopause** refers to years after menopause although it can be difficult. During this stage, menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes, may get better. However, some people continue to experience menopausal symptoms for a decade or longer after the menopause transition. As a result of a lower estrogen level, people in the postmenopausal phase are at an increased risk for several health conditions, such as osteoporosis and heart disease.

Menopause is part of a woman's sexual maturation and is not a disease or condition although people may experience many symptoms of menopause. Menopause symptoms may last for an average of 4.5 years following a woman's last period and 7.4 years in total according to a study published in JAMA. The study suggests health care professionals advise people to expect 7-year duration for their symptoms. It also notes that women who experience regular symptoms before the menopause or during the early stages may run a higher risk of a longer duration with some women having symptoms for 11.8 years. Approximately 8 in 10 women have symptoms before and end after the ending of their periods. The average age for menopause is 51 years however this age range varies. Menopause may happen early when a woman is her forties or later when she is in her late 50s. The onset of menopause can also follow surgery that reduces ovarian function or hormones such as hysterectomy.

Symptoms of Menopause:

They start when estrogens levels being to drop. Typically, this happens in 3-5 years before menopause starts. Following are the symptoms of menopause.

1. **Irregular menstruation:** As estrogens levels drop the menstrual cycle may change leading to menstruation cycle being irregular and the flow might be heavy or lighter.
2. **Vaginal Dryness:** Vaginal lubrication decreases. The vaginal tissues become thinner leading to vaginal inflammation and painful intercourse. Lack of libido can also occur with menopause.
3. **Decreased fertility:** Pregnancy is not possible as ovaries do not release eggs.
4. **Weight gain:** There might be gain in body mass as the rate of metabolism slows down.
5. **Hot flashes:** Fluctuations in hormone levels might lead to hot flashes either in upper body or throughout the body.
6. **Night sweats:** Hot flashes that happen during sleep cause night sweats disturbing the sleep and leading to intense sweating and waking the person up.
7. **Mood changes:** Hormonal fluctuations might lead to mood changes which should be accepted by the immediate family and people around. It may also be a result of fatigue due to sleep disturbances or a reaction of diminishing beauty.
8. **Muscular systems:** Loss of muscle mass might accompany at a higher rate during menopause leading to stiffness and painful joints.
9. **Attention problems:** Difficulties in concentration, lapses in memory are also commonly seen.
10. **Hair loss and thinning of skin:** Extreme fluctuations might lead to thinning of skin and hair loss.
11. **Urinary frequency and incontinence:** Frequency of urination might increase due to weakening of the muscles that control the pelvic floor.

Menopause itself does not require medical treatment as it is not a medical condition but many women seek relief from its uncomfortable symptoms. Estrogen therapy is one of the most effective options for relieving menopause related hot flashes.

Life After Menopause

Risk of some conditions mentioned below increase after menopause.

1. **Cardiovascular disease:** Due to decline in estrogens levels risk of heart disease rises.

2. **Osteoporosis:** For the first years after menopause bone density decreases leading to chances of osteoporosis.
3. **Cancers:** Risk of breast and ovarian cancer rises after menopause.
4. **Sexual function:** Vaginal dryness from decreased moisture production and loss of elasticity can cause discomfort and slight bleeding during sexual intercourse.

References

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