

The menopause and its associated hormonal changes are a normal part of ageing for women; however, it can make you feel the furthest thing from normal. The menopause is defined as the time after a woman has had an entire 12 months without a period, and on average occurs from the age of 50–52. Perimenopause is the time before the menopause and lasts anywhere from 4 to 8 years. It can be a confusing time for women too, with some experiencing menopausal symptoms in their 40s.

The most common symptoms are changing menstrual cycles, hot flashes, mood changes, vaginal dryness, and difficulty sleeping. With nearly two-thirds of women experiencing hot flashes, this could be the most commonly reported menopausal symptom.

Usually, the menopause is caused by the natural reduction in the levels of the hormones (chemical messengers) oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone that are produced by the ovaries. However, your ovaries do not shut up shop overnight and it is these fluctuating levels of oestrogen and progesterone that can impact the neurotransmitters in your brain which in turn can cause mood swings and anxiety. The changes in oestrogen level are also responsible for hot flashes and night sweats which can disrupt sleep. Poor quality or insufficient sleep is known to make one vulnerable to depression, anxiety and mood swings – which in turn contribute to poor sleep patterns. So a vicious cycle develops.

Menopause doesn't have to be a bad word. It can be an empowering period of growth, self-awareness, and better health. The tips below may help guide you through the challenging times ahead.

1 + Replenish Your Oestrogen

Oestrogen has been your 'accelerator pedal' for the majority of your life. It is involved in cardiovascular health, fat burning, reproduction, sexual intercourse, healthy bones and skin and keeping your mood up! Lower levels of oestrogen can affect

Master Your Menopause and Save Your Sanity

many different systems in your body having effects on your physical and mental health. Speak to a doctor about treatment options.

2 + Add Some Progesterone

Progesterone is the 'brake pedal'. It is a calming hormone and opposes oestrogen. It can help you sleep better and give you emotional calmness.

3 + Manage Your Cortisol (Stress) Levels

The stress you are experiencing can be both physical and emotional, which causes the release of cortisol (the main stress hormone), which causes inflammation and can lead to disease in the long term. Regular physical exercise, yoga, meditation, or having a massage are all ways of reducing stress and therefore cortisol. You may have your own way of coping with stress be it painting, or cooking. Find what works for you and use it often as your stress levels may fluctuate throughout the menopause.

4 + Support Your Adrenal Glands

Ever heard of these things? Probably not. They are small glands that sit on top of your kidneys. As you age, they become more relevant as they take over much of the hormone production that was formerly handled by your ovaries. These small glands can be taxed to their limit in today's world with increasing stress, sedentary lifestyle, alcohol, smoking and poor diet. Chronic stress on these glands can lead to adrenal fatigue or insufficiency. Take care of them by managing your stress levels and making healthy life choices.

5 + Engage Your Thyroid

The job of the thyroid is to control the energy in your body. It produces hormones that regulate your metabolic rate. During the menopause the lower oestrogen levels affect your metabolism and alter your use of glycogen and fats. If you are feeling fatigued and flat, whether from lack of sleep, over work or too much stress, the thyroid's job is to allocate energy for different tasks in your body. As with most things, poor lifestyle choices can place demands on the thyroid and affect energy levels.

Correct and optimal function of the thyroid depends on iodine absorbed from your diet. Foods rich in iodine include fish (eg. cod and tuna), other seafoods (which are generally rich in iodine), dairy products and iodised salt.

6 + Exercise

Physical activity floods your system with endorphins ('happy' hormones). This will ease stress and lift your spirits. Yoga and Pilates can alleviate headaches, aches, and pains and build muscle



to combat weight gain common during the menopause. Make exercise fun and enjoyable – join your spouse, friends or make it family time. A designated time to focus on self-care is just as beneficial as the exercise itself. Exercise can help combat symptoms like low mood, anxiety, poor sleep and fatigue.

7 Break the Silence

Being open and honest about what you are experiencing could go a long way to getting help, support and understanding from family and friends, even a counsellor. Don't feel you need to hide your symptoms or that you are struggling. The menopause should not be a taboo topic, all women in the world go through this change, as all boys and girls go through puberty. You can help end the stigma of the menopause by starting the conversation.

8 Have Sex

Intimacy is a stress-reliever and a time to feel connected with your partner. Many women, however, become self-conscious or uncomfortable with their bodies during the menopause. Sex can become awkward, even painful due to vaginal dryness caused by depleting oestrogen levels. As a result, sex is often cut out when you need it most. Regular sex in a trusted relationship encourages women to maintain beauty rituals and keep fit at every age. You may need to experiment with surface lubricants and vaginal suppositories to account for natural moisture changes.

9 Eat Well

That doesn't mean eat in excess but make good choices. Your body is changing, and its needs for different vitamins and minerals obtained from a healthy well-balanced diet may require scrutiny!

Certain foods may minimise risks of moodiness and lost focus, or help build healthy bones reducing fracture risk and tilt you away from weight gain. For example:

- Omega-3 fatty acids support healthy brain functioning and lower risk of depression.
- Vitamin D and calcium fortify bones and increase energy.
- Chromium can help address problems with weight gain, such as high blood

pressure and increased risks for diabetes.

- Green tea provides health benefits from compounds such as anti-oxidants and amino acids that can be very calming.
- A diet high in processed foods and refined carbs/sugars is associated with a higher risk of depression and worse bone health.
- Irregular eating, like skipping meals, can affect your metabolism and hinder weight loss post-menopause.
- A diet including high-quality protein may prevent loss of lean muscle mass, aid weight loss and help regulate mood and sleep.
- Drinking enough water daily (8–10 glasses) can help prevent weight gain, aid weight loss and help reduce symptoms or dryness in the skin.
- Foods rich in phytoestrogen (such as soya beans, soy products, tofu, tempeh, flaxseed, linseed, sesame seed and beans) may have a small effect on reducing hot flushes and heart disease risk.
- Avoid trigger foods – these include caffeine, alcohol, sugary and spicy foods. They can be associated with exacerbating symptoms like hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings.

There is a lot of information out there about supplements, which can be confusing and become very expensive! Speak to a trusted healthcare provider about diet and what supplements (if any) you may need during this time.

10 Seek Care

Look for those who are experts in the fields of women's mental health and reproductive health. Different medical providers approach the menopausal transition from different perspectives. Don't just suffer when you could be enjoying life and preserving relationships.

Your support team could be the traditional medical professionals required for hormone replacement therapy, annual/bi-annual check-ups for mammograms, and bone mineral density scans. But it could also include psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, women's health physical therapists, acupuncturists, yoga teachers, nutritionists,

sex therapists, etc, who may be able to offer you relief at different times.

11 Become an Expert in YOU

Tracking and recording your symptoms will give you a better sense of control of your menopause mental health and feel less like the helpless victim of your hormonal fluctuations. Recording your achievements in maintaining an exercise routine can also be great motivation to keep you at it! Doing this will also help you identify any triggers that may exacerbate your symptoms or things that ease them which could be hugely beneficial.

Experiment with different things, as what worked for your friend may not work for you and vice versa. Misery loves company – remind yourself that many other women are experiencing similar symptoms and struggling as well. Seek out online support groups, talk with friends, or even ask your mum or aunts. Value your wellbeing in new and committed ways; be accountable for your stress levels; be patient with yourself and others. Most importantly continue to have fun and enjoy life, because laughter and good times balance the body's biochemical intricacies instantly.

This, too, shall pass. Whatever you might be suffering through right now will not last forever. The menopause is not an illness. It's a natural part of life. Although its symptoms can be difficult to deal with, maybe some of these tips will help alleviate and/or prevent them.

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