

**MENOPAUSE AND PERIMENOPAUSE**

**What is Menopause?**

Menopause is the point when your periods stop forever. Your ovaries stop making the hormones estrogen and progesterone and you cannot get pregnant. It usually happens on its own around age 51, but it can be sooner or later. Menopause can also happen because of certain surgeries, such as hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and ovaries), medical conditions, or medicines.

**What is perimenopause?**

Perimenopause is the time leading up to menopause when you can still get pregnant. Most people start perimenopause in their 40s, but it can start earlier.

You can get pregnant during perimenopause even if your periods are not regular. If you want to avoid pregnancy, you need to use birth control for at least 1 year after your last period. Talk to your doctor or nurse about the methods that would be best for you.

**How do I know if I'm in menopause?**

The only way to know that you have gone through menopause is if you have not had your period for 1 year. If you have any of the symptoms below, talk to your doctor or nurse. You can figure things out by reviewing your health history and any symptoms together.

**What are the symptoms?**

- **Changes to your period** – You may start to skip periods, or they may become lighter. They may also become heavier, or last longer. While these changes can be normal, talk to your doctor or nurse about any bleeding that is abnormal for you.
- **Other changes** – You may have one, some, or none of the following symptoms:
  - hot flashes – sudden or gradual waves of body heat that last from 30 seconds to 5 minutes
  - trouble sleeping
  - night sweats
  - bladder infections
  - leaking urine (pee) or frequent urination
  - mood swings
  - changes that may affect your sex life such as vaginal dryness, pain with sex, or change in sex drive

Symptoms may be temporary, or they may last for years.

**Are there treatments for my symptoms?**

Menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) can help with some symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness, or sleep problems. It can be given in different forms – pills, patches, rings, vaginal rings, creams, and shots.

There are other medicines that may help. Ask your doctor or nurse about the treatment(s) that may be right for you.

Some people choose alternative treatments to relieve menopause symptoms, such as homeopathy, herbs, Chinese medicine, and acupuncture. While research has not proven their effectiveness or safety, some people may find them helpful. Talk to your doctor or nurse about any herbal or [over-the-counter](#) products that you are thinking about trying.

For symptoms that affect your sex life, trying one or more of the following may help:

- Use a water-based lubricant.
- Have sex more often. This can increase blood flow to your vagina and keep tissues healthy.
- Give your body time to get aroused. Moisture from being aroused protects tissues.
- Talk with your partner about your feelings. They may have similar concerns.
- Practice pelvic floor exercises. This can make the muscles used in orgasm stronger, and can help with leaking urine. Ask your doctor or nurse about how to do these exercises.
- Prescription hormone medicines such as estrogen creams, tablets, or rings may improve dryness.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are still a risk if you have a new sex partner or high-risk sexual activities. Use condoms and get tested, just as you would at any age.

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### Menopause and bone health

Bones become weaker after menopause. Osteoporosis happens when you lose too much bone and this increases your risk of broken bones. There are things you can do to prevent osteoporosis:

- Get enough calcium and vitamin D.
- Exercise. Do weight-bearing exercise (walking, jogging, dancing) and strength-training exercise for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse about your medical and family history, and if testing for bone loss is right for you.

### Emotional changes in menopause

The hormone changes can make you feel anxious, irritable or tired. Some of the symptoms of menopause – like sleep changes – can make these feelings worse.

This may also be a time of major life changes - stress at work or in relationships, “empty nest” syndrome as adult children leave home, the need to take care of aging parents or partners.

If you find it hard to manage, talk to your doctor or nurse about treatment and resources.

### What else do I need to know?

You may need to meet with your doctor or nurse more regularly. Breast exams and mammograms are recommended yearly beginning at age 40. For most people, testing for cervical cancer should continue every 3 to 5 years until the age of 65. It's also important to regularly check your blood pressure and cholesterol, test for diabetes and colon cancer, and stay up-to-date on your vaccinations.

Ask your doctor or nurse about vaccinations and screenings that you may need to stay healthy.

**Your health is important to us.** If you have any questions or concerns, please call us. We are happy to help you.